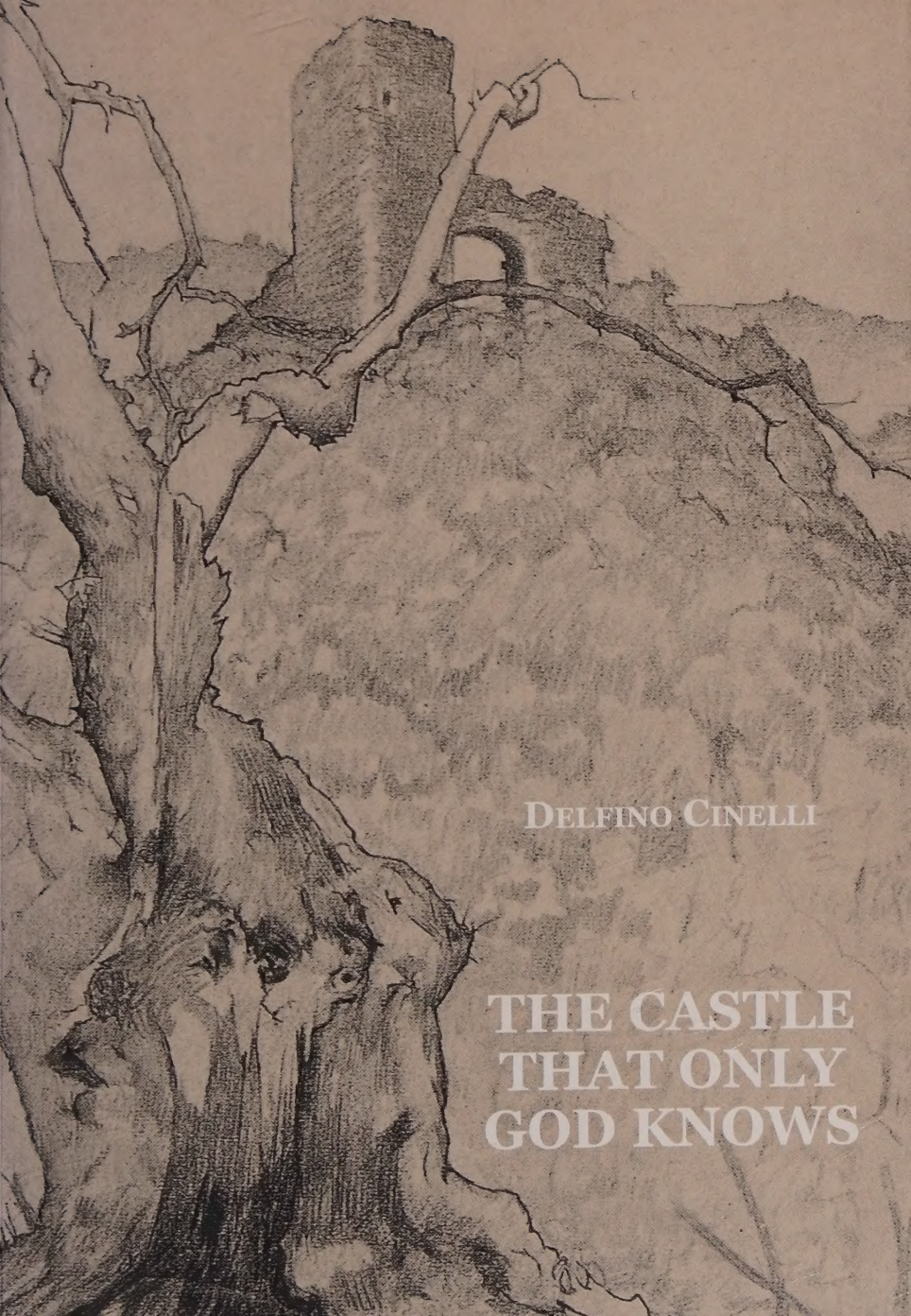
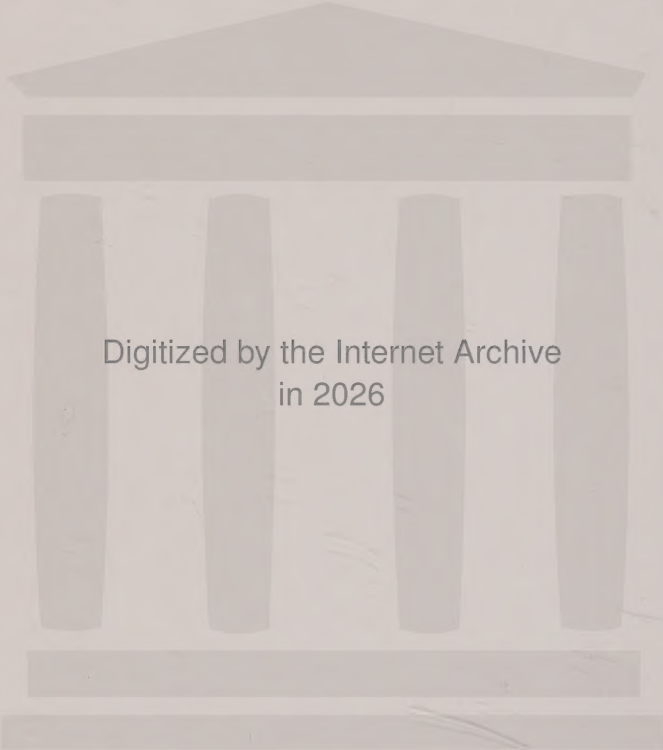




DELFINO CINELLI

THE CASTLE
THAT ONLY
GOD KNOWS



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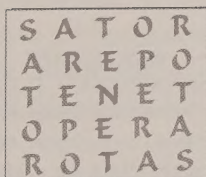
THE CASTLE THAT ONLY GOD KNOWS

Translated from the Italian

CASTIGLION CHE

DIO SOL SA

by Archie Stone



SATOR • SIENA
MMV

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Manfredi Piccolomini

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1991
ITALIAN EDITION

The reprinting of *The Castle That Only God Knows* on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the author Delfino Cinelli is a most appropriate way of celebrating the memory of this apparently simple — and in reality rather complex — Tuscan author. It is in fact a book somewhere between a novel, an autobiography and a *Bildungsroman* that marks what was probably the crucial stage Cinelli's career on the threshold of his forties in 1929: his passage from the active to the contemplative life, marked by his retirement from industrial activity to his exile to the just-acquired estate of Spannocchia in the province of Siena. At the beginning of the book he describes the decision of Gherardo, his autobiographical alter ego:

At forty, to find oneself changing the course of one's life. But maybe at first one doesn't see clearly. Some are born to a vocation; some are the lucky ones who see clearly from the beginning; and some are the thoughtless ones

who through the force of inertia follow a rut even when it becomes obvious that it's going nowhere. One recalls the dismay of one's father, fifteen or twenty years earlier, when one refused to follow him in his business. It was painful not to be able to please him: the sad astonishment of the old man to learn that he could not continue in the flesh of his son made him suffer physically, been away from their little farms, who had been born there and would die there, had understood. In him the cycle of the generations was being completed: his father had abandoned the land for action, for adventure; but in his turn Gherardo had left for study, for knowledge, for understanding, and now, as he approached his mature years, he was returning to the land.

Born in Signa near Florence in 1889 to an industrial family (straw products), Delfino Cinelli had a cosmopolitan commercial and economic education that led him to studies in various European countries. In the first years of his adult life he entered the family industry, made many trips to the United States, where for some time he directed the firm's New York office. His literary awakening, if one can call it that rather than a persistent latent impulse, arrived relatively late, and with it he abandoned his commercial career for the intellectual life, a retreat much like the "spiritual" retreat of his ancestral world in the Tuscan countryside, more intellectual than artistic.

As can be readily seen, this is not the typical biography of a Tuscan writer in the period between the two wars. Notwithstanding the many similarities, I think that to define Cinelli as a writer of sketches, as did the Garzanti *Nuova Enciclopedia della Letteratura*, or

as a "gentleman writer," as did a still-living contemporary critic, is wrong. In *Castle*, the descriptions of the countryside and of country activities do not constitute, despite obvious similarities, examples of the prose art in the spirit of Solaria — that is, they are not exercises in pure literature on the part of a writer forced by personal and political events to take refuge in a tower of art for art's sake. The descriptions of the country must be placed side by side with those of the people who populate the book, the many peasants and employees who only manage barely to subsist in this mountainous zone of Siena, so beautiful and yet so inhospitable and ungenerous. Thus there emerges an often misunderstood aspect of the book: the historical and the sociological, and especially the latter, two characteristics scarcely ever found in the works of other Italian writers of the period and even after.

The attention that Cinelli gives to the landscape of the Sienese countryside, so rich in forests and in rock, in hills and valleys, punctuated here and there by ruins of ancient towers and medieval castles sometimes adapted as wretched and solitary farmhouses, has a strong historic taste, as if the pages longed to recapture the poetry of a past long vanished. It is not difficult to imagine the writer intent on his work dreaming of the past of these places, a theater of conflicts between opposing armies in the dark centuries. At the same time, this landscape is also seen through the eyes of an art lover fully conscious that out of this past were born the great arts that gave origin to the Ren-

aissance. Himself an art collector, Cinelli rediscovered in the Sienese landscape the simple spirit and the innocent colors of the "primitive" painters, their expression of a sincere and innocent faith, that ardent spirit which always precedes the onset of a historic period rich in consequences.

Similarly, Cinelli's compassion for the impoverished laborers and peasants who populated these lands is not to be read as aristocratic posturing or the affectation of a country gentleman of leisure, as is often the case, and, it must be recognized, as is only natural. The book is rich in comments and in passages which attempt to explain the deeply rooted origins of this poverty, to give it a rationale, to examine how it can be eliminated.

In an important page of the book the owner Gherardo refuses to a peasant the right to place himself further in debt to him, the *padrone*, because he knows that this is the mechanism of indebtedness that triggers the vicious cycle by which the peasant is forever tied to lands he does not possess, like a slave reduced ever further to the status of a manual laborer without personal dignity. Thus — and perhaps with a premonition of the Communist struggles of twenty years later — as early as the 'Thirties Cinelli showed himself through the words of his protagonist Gherardo to be fully conscious of the classic problem of the Tuscan peasant and indicated that to resolve it, an enlightened paternal attitude could be extremely useful. If one notes that these considerations and these analyses

emerge in the center of a Tuscany where only twenty years later the much more primitive concept of class warfare was raised as a road to social injustice, perhaps we should realize that the moment has arrived to re-examine our recent agrarian history. *Castle* is an excellent documentation of these circumstances, as well as an ardent invitation to such a re-examination. Perhaps, if among the great landowners there had been more enlightened persons like Delfino Cinelli, the social and political polarization that later developed would have been avoided.

A sworn enemy of Fascism — to the point of breaking with his old friend Giovanni Papini following the latter's joining the regime — Cinelli passed a good part of the last years of his life in the United States in what was probably an attempt to recapture his youthful American experience. This was another cycle, similar in certain ways to his generational cycle of return to the land, which rose in this case to the banner of intellectual liberty and in the conviction, not wrong in those years, that Europe was heading for a catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions. In America he entered into contact with the ever-growing group of émigré Italians and again took up the cultivation of the acquaintances of his American wife. He even attempted to write directly in English on the model of progress and social organization that America represented, as opposed to Europe. He wrote two books, *Gusts among the Skyscrapers* and *Suicidal Capitalism*, which can be considered prototypes of the vast literature on the

American ideal that appeared in postwar Italy.

His perfect knowledge of English, his style, vision and cosmopolitan culture, and a natural courtesy of manner rendered Cinelli immediately accepted in many American circles, from expatriates to the much more exclusive “WASP” society in which predominated, and still predominates, italophilia mixed with strong racist anti-Italian sentiments. Cinelli, unlike his younger but similarly received compatriots, succeeded in finding a home in this difficult ambience. Moravia always had unpleasant memories of America and never failed to repeat, until the last years of his life, how the Americans were basically a primitive people, materialistic and without culture. The progressive Moravia, contrary to the enlightened but conservative Cinelli, never succeeded in understanding America or, in any event, refused, rightly or wrongly, to understand it. Personally I can’t say which of these two attitudes was the result of correct analysis, but the difference, in the light of later Italian literary history, is certainly interesting.

In recent years I’ve had the opportunity of speaking at length with Alberto Moravia about Cinelli, who, if I haven’t yet mentioned it, was my grandfather. Moravia once said about him *in mundo caecorum monoculus est rex*, in the world of the blind the one-eyed man is king, an obvious reference to the Italian literary situation of the period. As a writer who loved to define himself above all as a professional for whom writing was second nature, Moravia looked down a bit on this

industrialist-turned-writer-at-forty, but at the same time he recognized without a shadow of a doubt that Cinelli was one of the few, even if not the only, sincere cosmopolitan voice in the squalid panorama of Italian culture during the second decade of Fascism. It was difficult in that period to evade the intellectual conformism imposed by the regime without the risk of very serious consequences. The result was silence or flight of the best minds. Cinelli, according to Moravia, was one of the few who succeeded in speaking and writing sincerely without having to go into voluntary exile.

With regret and humor Moravia told me of having written with Mario Soldati the film script for Cinelli's novel *La Trappola* (The Trap), "the first contract I had after my marriage to Elsa Morante". Moravia recalled the difficulty in shooting the film, with a restless Soldati, and also in making a script out of *Trappola*, "a novel with a plot that didn't stand up well."

In reality the question of Cinelli's plots is an important subject that relates directly to the readers of *The Castle That Only God Knows*. Moravia belonged to that school of writers who give crucial importance to plot, for whom the interweaving of events and characters, the succession of incidents and the final resolution constitute the keystone of a successful novel. But this is only one point of view. The readers of *Castle* will note from the beginning that in the book any plot is nearly nonexistent, and that it would suffice to change the name of the protagonist and of the farm to con-

firm the personal landmarks of Cinelli's life. Does this mean that the book is not literature?. Of course not! It simply means that it may be wrong to call *Castle* a "novel", if by that we mean a long and complex story with a nineteenth-century-type resolution of all the interwoven elements.

In fact one can read *Castle* — novel or not — from an extremely modern viewpoint, perhaps conceptual and minimalist, for which the novel superstructure becomes downright superfluous and an obstacle to the literary purity of the narration. A bit like primitive Sienese painting — nowadays object of such admiration on the part of the conceptual avant-garde — *Castle* is pure narration about a corner of the world by a writer who sees it with the enchanted eyes of a reverent admiration and who believes that any modification, any novelistic enrichment, cannot do other than spoil its innocence. Cinelli was perhaps compelled to attempt to insert *Castle* into the novel form because of the absence in Italian literature of other narrative forms, like travel books and literary documentaries based on personal experience, in which the book could acquire its legitimacy in the marketplace. In reading it today, when even in the citadel of Italian literature so many things have changed, perhaps we should think less in terms of a novel and more as a document, the artistic product of a literary experience loved and suffered. To read Cinelli, a character so uncommon and so difficult to classify in a social, ideological, or professional category, we need also to decontextualize his work. Then

his prose acquires all the freshness and charm of a discovery.

In Italian literature the acceptance and admiration of off-key personalities is gradually developing, of artistic figures from the most varied backgrounds and whom literature, as an organized system, has traditionally preferred to ignore. To understand and admire Cinelli one must accept from the beginning that it is extremely difficult to pigeonhole him. He is certainly not a mere writer of Tuscan sketches, nor a novelist of French- and English-inspired plots. The list of "certainly nots" could continue at length. To admire Cinelli one must admire his diversity and non-conformity. I believe that the best way to "define" Cinelli and to respect this diversity is to cite once again (as has frequently been done) what was written by his great friend, the art historian Bernard Berenson, in his diary on 2 May 1942, having just learned of Cinelli's death:

I have just learned of the death of Delfino Cinelli. Death, like the sun and the rain, acts on the just and the unjust. I know of no one who less deserved to die, whose loss brings advantage to no one, who will be sadly missed by all who knew him. Not only because he was one of the most thoughtful artists of the word of recent years, who communicated all the ambience of the Tuscan countryside and its people as no other author has done; nor only because he had a refined sense of literature, but equally for his profound and generous humanity and for his courageous actions in the face of historical events, and for his comprehension of the forces which moved them.

Cinelli's work took him frequently to America which he learned to know and to love. He was one of the few Italians with whom I could discuss American matters and persons as if he himself were American.

Manfredi Piccolomini
Siena, March 1991

Randall Stratton

INTRODUCTION TO THE
ENGLISH EDITION
AND
HISTORICAL NOTES

C*astiglion Che Dio Sol Sa* was first published in 1928, just three years after its author, the Florentine writer Delfino Cinelli, had purchased the large agricultural estate of Spannocchia in the Montagnola region southwest of the city of Siena. The book to a great extent tells Delfino's own story as he struggled to rebuild the estate after many years of neglect. The situations, ideas and feelings experienced by the protagonist of *Castiglion*, Gherardo, as he deals with the fictional Cerreta, clearly must have been those undergone by Delfino himself.

In the story Delfino calls the estate Cerreta, but his descriptions of it exactly describe the Tenuta di Spannocchia. The nearby ruins of the church and monastery of Santa Lucia are referred to as Sant'Ansano, the neighboring estates of Pentolina and Cerbaia are

called Montorsaio and Marmoraia respectively, and his Osteria Bianca describes the present day inn of Montebello. Every other geographic reference in the story, to villages, roads, farmsteads, and areas of cultivation and forest, are all actual places on Spannocchia or in the surrounding area.

The title refers to one of the more suggestive elements of the property, the remains of the medieval fortress so remote and isolated in deep forest that it is said to be the “castle that only God knows”. The protagonist, Gherardo, says:

Castiglioni, *castiglion che Dio sol sa*, the castle that only God knows. Its massive tower had long guarded the peace of the mountains and valleys of the region, of *his* region. It was the sign of man, of man’s will. How much hope, how much love, he had experienced since he first became aware of Castiglion!

Castiglioni figures in some of the events of the story, but most of all it is a symbol of man’s presence in a beautiful yet wild and difficult landscape, a landscape which in every way shapes the lives and characters of its inhabitants. The effect of this landscape on man, and man’s effect on it in return, is a central theme to which the story returns repeatedly.

My own introduction to Castiglioni came in the summer of 1981 when I participated in a two week program to study the castle and to attempt to develop a proposal for its future utilization that would persuade the Italian government, its owner at that time, to commit the resources necessary to preserve it. Our effort was being sponsored by the American non-

profit Etruscan Foundation, which housed and fed us at Spannocchia. The president of the Foundation was Spannocchia's owner, its *padrone*, Count Ferdinando Cinelli. On arriving, my friends and I had been greeted by his daughter, Francesca. Little did I imagine at that moment that a year and a half later Francesca and I would be married and that I would eventually inherit the management of the estate as my life's work.

In Delfino's story, told through the person of the fictional Gherardo, there is much that explains Spannocchia — what it was, how it functioned, how and why it has an emotional effect on those who come to know it. After the many changes that have occurred over the last fifty years, probably greater than any changes during the previous 800 years, the window on the past that *Castiglion* provides is of great historical interest and helps explain much that otherwise would remain poorly understood; yet at the same time, one is amazed at how much has not changed, how many of the same issues and problems are still faced at Spannocchia today.

Delfino Cinelli died in 1942 at Spannocchia. No member of the owners' family lived on the property for the next fifty years. Following the end of World War II, the entire *mezzadria* of sharecropping system — see below, p. xxi, HISTORICAL NOTES — died out in Tuscany; during the 1950's and 60's the resident tenant farming families departed one after another to work in towns and cities and, and the estate went into a slow decline. When Francesca and I moved with our

children from Boston to Spannocchia in 1992 we assumed the task of reshaping the property after fifty years of benign neglect. The Spannocchia Foundation was formed in 2002 to promote and support the conservation of Spannocchia and the utilization of the property to educate visitors about issues of sustainability. Today, Spannocchia is a working farm once again, raising traditional breeds of farm animals and producing most of the food, wine, oil, and even heating fuel that is required to support the activities of the education-based tourism which allows the estate in its traditional form to remain viable in the modern world.

This first ever English version of *Castiglione* has seen the light of day thanks primarily to the talent, perseverance, and fundamental generosity of Archie Stone. Archie came to Spannocchia on vacation a number of years ago as a participant in an Etruscan archaeological dig. An avid student of the Italian language, he was intrigued by the story of *Castiglione*, and volunteered to translate it into English for the benefit of the many enthusiasts of Spannocchia who can't enjoy the book in Italian.

Delfino Cinelli wrote beautifully in a very literary style, but the language used in *Castiglione* is more than that — it is peculiar to not just Tuscany but specifically to the immediate area of the Sieneese Montagnola. Archie has succeeded admirably in transforming this difficult, often complex and sometimes convoluted idiom into narrative English that still conveys a sense of Cinelli's original style. A significant role was also

played by Gerald Stone, who edited the text primarily for syntax, style, and usage, while I provided some additional editing relating to details about local geography and agricultural practices.

For those readers who are familiar with Spannocchia, I hope the book now in your hands will provide you with the experience of revisiting some of the magic of that remarkable place, and a deeper understanding of what it was and still is. For everyone else, may you experience through the images generated in this story an understanding of life as it was in Tuscany not so very long ago, and a sense of those memories, of that reality, that Spannocchia tries to preserve.

HISTORICAL NOTES

Fundamental to understanding the themes of *Castiglione Che Dio Sol Sa* is a recognition of the reality represented by the *mezzadria* tenant farming system under which the estate of Cerreta functioned in this novel. Set in the 1920's, the story provides a glimpse into this system which defined rural life in the region for centuries, changing very little over time and encompassing social relationships, cultural practices, and agricultural methods. Developed as early as the 1100's in Tuscany, it provided peasant sharecroppers with a farmhouse and the use of associated lands in exchange for half of their crop production, in Latin *dimidia agri*, "half of the field," by 1200 Italianized to vulgate "mezzadria."

The tenant, in medieval Latin a *mediator* or “one-halfer”, became a vulgate *mezzadro*. The owner, or *padrone*, supplied the land and buildings, maintained roads and bridges on the property, paid the taxes, and provided centralized purchasing and marketing services and short-term financing. The peasants farmed their land to produce everything they needed to live on: fruits, vegetables, grains, animals, wine, and olive oil, and when needed served as paid day labor for construction and maintenance projects. Mezzadria contracts between landowner and farm family were very detailed and all-encompassing.

Cinelli’s description of the fictional “Cerreta” exactly matches the actual estate of Spannocchia. The farm center, or *fattoria*, makes up most of the mass of the castle and serves as headquarters of the estate: office, stables, shops, winery, granary and sheds for farm equipment. The fattoria is adjacent to the villa, tower, and church and is the hub of the vast estate’s activity pursued in the outlying vineyards, olive groves, tenant farms, grazing lands, and forests.

The bridge referred to in the novel by its real name, *Ponte della Pia* is in actuality one of the more picturesque in Tuscany, crossing the seasonal stream Torrente Rosia from the provincial road SP73 onto the property of Spannocchia, where in ancient times it continued on a now long-abandoned medieval road to the hermitage and church of Santa Lucia, and then on to the Tyrrhenian coast. Local folklore tells that Pia de’ Tolomei, wife of the feudal lord Paganello de’ Pan-

nochieschi, was in the late thirteenth century transported along this road to her imprisonment and death, some say murder, in his castle in the Maremma. Dante reports meeting her in Purgatory (Canto V, 132) in 1300.

The farm of Sant'Ansano as described in the story is identical to the real ruins of Santa Lucia, originally an Augustinian hermitage with origins in the tenth century, and eventually an important monastery and church. It reached its peak of activity in the thirteenth century and then declined, until it was finally abandoned in the 1600's, during which century the church was destroyed by fire. The property subsequently was acquired by the Spannocchi family, the surviving monastery wing was converted to use as a farmhouse, and the site became one of the estate's tenant farms.

R.S.
Spannocchia
February, 2005

PART ONE

I

As the rolling hills were reluctantly shrugging off the morning mists, the tolling bell of Cerreta scattered its frail and discordant notes among the cold folds of the wooded valley. Farmers and woodcutters converging on the road from the paths that furrowed the slopes like streams, for years had paid it little attention, but a wandering stranger, with his sensibilities attuned to the more severe harmony found in the majestic lines of that landscape, would have been sadly surprised by the hoarse, cracked song of that piece of wounded scrap iron.

The old bell, inscribed with the gothic characters JOHANNES • SENENSIS • ME • FECIT • A.D. 1432, had been holed by two gun shots at the time of Count Ulderigo Ardenghi di Cerreta, on the return from one of those wild boar hunts that in those times periodically brought together the gentlemen of the local rural aristocracy.

From the central piazza of the castle, following the

example of the count, they had given vent to their bellicose instincts still unsatisfied by the hunt, firing on the bell in the tower.

At the first fusillade the bell had responded with a voice of silver harmony, a note of *bel canto*, its swan song. At the second, a brief stroke, hoarse, mournful. And the guests had turned to other games. The inscription and the wounds remained, however, a concise chronicle of Cerreta: the emblem of those who had built it and of those who had destroyed it.

The castle of Cerreta dominates the roads from Siena and Colle Val d'Elsa, which after joining continue west toward the Maremma coastal plain. From below it looks like a small mountain village, houses pressing against the massive tower as if for protection. The high hills, almost mountains, were at the time of this account covered with low thick scrub reborn from the great fallen trunks of a devastated forest. Along the crests extended thick chestnut groves. The provincial roads bypass Cerreta, as if hesitant to advance into its solitude. The vast forests and the few worked fields of the great estate are divided between the basins of the Rosia, the Elsa, and the Ricauca (a major stream never dry, not even in the worst drought), which goes on to join the Merse; thus these hills mark the divide between the basins of the Arno and the Ombrone.

Of the ancient castle only the tower remains. The facade of the more recent main house, the villa, which though lacking a distinctive character has acquired an

imposing, refinedly scruffy rusticity, merges at a distance with the houses that surround it, in vassalage to the tower.

The drive rises steeply from the provincial highway via the valley of the Rigolenso dense with heavy scrub, levels out at the watershed where the mule tracks that descend from the hills and climb from the valleys merge, enters under the great contorted branches of the chestnuts and, bypassing the gates of the villa, emerges in the piazza of the church.

Despite the dry, harsh weather and a sharp north ear-biting wind, the turnout was good. The little church, done in a dusty pink by some rustic painter of half a century ago, had no other ornament than a travertine angel on the spire, an ancient work perhaps borrowed from the abbey of Sant'Ansano, down in the valley of the Rosia, whose ruins had long ago been converted into a farmhouse. In a sunny corner of the low wall that bordered the little piazza the old folks sat. Despite the privation, the exhausting work, and the rough life of the woods, people live long up there, thanks to the good air, the fine water, their frugality, and their simple habits. Their faces become deeply lined, their backs curved, and their hands, resting on canes, seem enormous compared to their fragile and dried-up limbs, but their pace is still firm and their legs possess an agility, a sureness, that to people of the plain appears more goat-like than human.

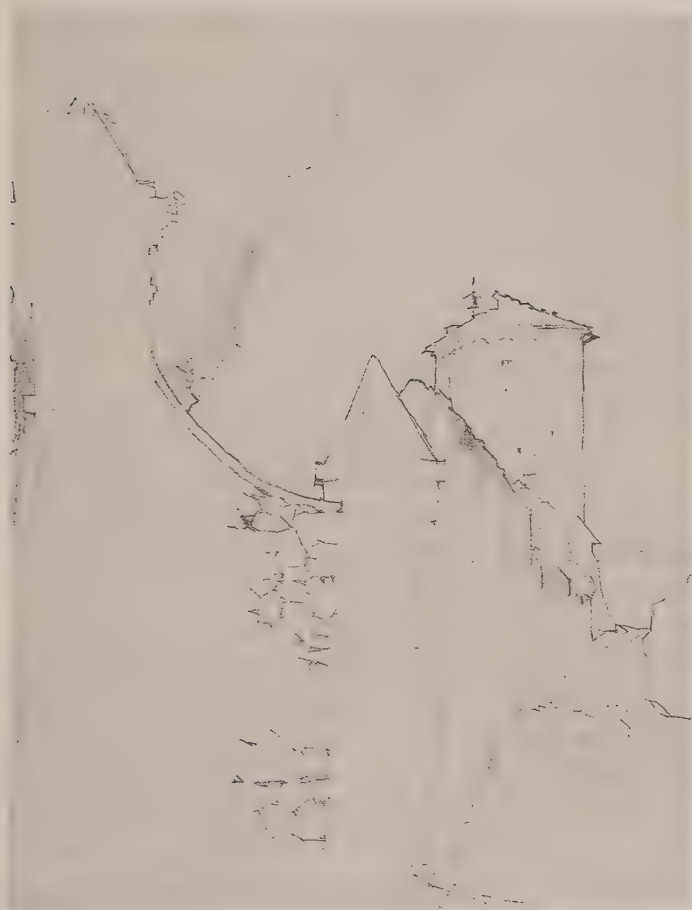
Old Zani, at the passage of some girls who, entering the church, made the floor tiles ring with their cleated

shoes, wrinkled his cheeks furrowed with symmetrical lines as intricate as a tattoo, and under his spent pipe fixed in his empty gums mumbled a stale joke. Next to him Donati, the oldest, touching ninety, appeared not to see, not to hear, not to be present except for his great, inert, dried-up body. For more than half a century that long thin old man had been arising in the dark before dawn to do the stable chores, so as to be in the fields at first light. Among the groups some boys were sneaking off; some, with hands in pockets, stood still and shivering in their light clothes under the acute chill of the air; others sat on their heels in a sunny corner.

The women entered the church and took up seats on their side. A little boy was lighting the altar candles with difficulty from a trembling flame on a stick. Two dogs were wandering, sniffing; in the middle some children played on the loose bricks.

Gherardo Anguillesi raised the faded damask curtain and, seeing that there were only a few women, entered the church. From the ceiling of roughly squared beams, supporting joists of unfinished chestnut, wide moist stains descended the walls. On the altar, in a richly gilded frame, was a lively colored print of Saint Catherine of Siena.

Ruggero, the foreman, came to meet him. It seemed uncanny how he was always at hand, even in church. Not that he was the religious type; in fact he was ill at ease there. At the look of commiseration that Gherardo gave him he said, "We need to keep our



eye on these roofs. At Cerreta it rains in all the houses, it's been so many years since a roof tile was replaced. I even need to keep my bed in the middle of the room. The walls are so wet they drip when the weather is damp."

Seeing that Gherardo was looking at the altar, he added, "There was a painting by a famous artist once. But when it entered into the possession of Count Ulderigo he sold it. Countess Adelaide, poor woman, searched high and low for it, and found it. Some say that it had been taken to America; no one knows how much money and trouble it took to get it back. All wasted; as soon as she died, poor woman, the Madonna took flight again, and nothing more has been heard of her."

"You remember that painting?"

"Yes sir. It was a Madonna with child Jesus, all gold, antique gilding, blackened. She wore a robe reaching the ground, and on either side there was an old man and an old woman, smaller, on their knees. People liked to say they were the old count and countess of Cerreta, from the time when the church was built. To tell the truth, it looked ugly to us, but apparently it had great value." In the brusque manner of the man, in his rough voice that made him seem ill at ease in the church, one felt a warmth of humanity, almost a depth of softness that had a certain power to sweeten disagreeable things, to make them appear natural, while he had the air of assuming the blame. This was not the first time that Gherardo had noted it. It was

pleasant to hear him, thought Gherardo, but not without a bit of suspicion. I need to be careful, not let it go too far.

The last bell rang; with a slow scraping of cleated boots the men entered. To the left of the altar, in solitary splendor, stood two armchairs of ancient leather, beautiful though shabby, bearing the count's crown of the Ardenghi. Gherardo hesitated, then stayed in the middle, among the men, standing.

Turning his gaze on the people, he recognized many; none was a new face, although he couldn't always connect a name. He felt himself invaded by a pleasant warmth of well-being. A little man headed quickly toward him, but when he came near, hesitated at the space people had left around him. Gherardo recognized him with a smile; it was Boccini, the tenant farmer of Sant'Ansano, the one who had first welcomed him to Cerreta. Once again he was surprised at how the most important acts of life can start from such minor events. Certainly, he owed to his meeting with that humble man, isolated in Sant'Ansano, the sudden upheaval of his life. And he turned over in his mind the sententious words with which Boccini had finished his description of the decadence of Cerreta, to which belonged his ancient and miserable home; of the counts who had it for a thousand years and didn't know how to conserve it; of the Corporation that had bought the estate to exploit the timber: "Cerreta is a fine estate, but an estate without a padrone is a ship without a captain."

Gherardo and Corinna had stopped at a little ruined bridge across a wild gorge, dominated by the solemn severity of the nature that surrounded it. On leaving Siena, as soon as they had passed through the gate in the city wall, they had experienced a rude fascination with a landscape that suddenly acquired vaster and more austere outlines, where one could breathe more deeply. Leaving to their right the Montagnola, black with dense ilex, they entered the broad plain extending south to the first greyish-white outcrops of the Crete. On a sign they read "To the Maremma." At Rosia, a gray village of stone backed up against the mountain around a slim Romanesque campanile, which rose in increasing rhythm from single, to double, to triple mullioned windows like musical notes in an echoing multiplicity, the road suddenly entered a deep valley.

On entering from the fertile plain into the rugged mountains that enclose it, the spirit becomes subject to tighter, sharper rhythms. It is the frontier between two regions, between two ways of life. With the closing of the valley souls become darker; the nature of man adjusts to the land that feeds him. Continuing, the valley opens toward the broader undulations of the high Elsa valley, except where the sorry little hill of Montarrenti, bristling with its ruined towers, obstructs the view, blocking it like a commanding gesture. The only sign of the hand of man that breaks the hostility of nature, the agile arc of an abandoned little bridge called the Ponte della Pia, spans the torrent and

unites the two banks with its slim presence, miraculously unharmed over the centuries.

Tradition has it that the ancient road to the Maremma passed over this bridge and through the deep woods of Cerreta to reach the valley of the Merse; and still today one can follow its trace in the woods, a remnant here and there torn up by erosion. Legend has it that La Pia de' Tolomei, when the procession that was carrying her to her final imprisonment was entering the dark hills, asked the inexorable Pannocchieschi, "Where are you taking me, Nello?"

Beyond the steep hills, in a grassy plain between patches of scrub, could be seen a roof and a high wall in ruins, covered with ivy. Behind rose a rocky slope covered with thick brush. Masses of oak and hornbeam saplings splashed soft gradations of green on the bright arbutus and the black ilex, up to the chestnuts that crowned the ridge, where amidst the light down of the just opened leaflets, the dried-out trunks writhed.

The house, born from the clinging of a succession of human generations to the remains of an ancient convent, rose from a meadow graced by a great walnut tree and wild cherries. The mossy roofs and narrow windows that signalled a poor home were combined with solemn arches and columns of travertine. Various stages of decay were evident. From sagging roofs that appeared ready to collapse from one moment to the next protruded the stubs of beams; hinges were gone or broken; lintels and frames sagged or were so broken

that the window openings reached the roof. There was evidence of the progressive dismantling of the building. In the middle was a patched-up area: two windows with glass, a door poorly fitted to an archway, on the roof some new tiles mottling in red the ancient dark and earthy terracotta.

Forgetting Corinna, Gherardo became engrossed in mentally reconstructing the building, reconnecting arches and columns, and while searching with his eyes in a pile of rock he experienced the pleasure of discovery in spotting, in what had appeared to be a large stone, a column capital sculpted in acanthus leaves. From that stone his thought moved to the ancient monks who had brought order and civility into this wasteland, to their tenacious work in the medieval darkness, then to the slow decadence that had brought back the wasteland into which the ruins of their buildings were being reabsorbed. And just then through one of those arches came that little man who greeted them with his *buongiorno*.

For him they were only passers-by, but obeying a tradition of hospitality, he invited them into his kitchen to sit on a fireplace bench in front of a slowly burning stump, to savor the wine from his vineyard, the bread from his wheat, the cheese from his sheep. And Gherardo's disillusionment in finding the rooms lacking in any sign of antiquity was lost in the pleasure of hearing him speak. His vocabulary conserved a purity from days long gone. The images with which he expressed his simple concepts revealed an instinctive

art that rendered common things naively memorable. He spoke slowly. He seemed to see his words flow from his lips in a pre-established order. And, like the expressions that fall from the mouths of the kneeling saints in primitive frescos, whose meanings are accentuated by the richness of the miniaturized capital letters, so in the cadence of his phrases the most sonorous accents fell with the unexpected grace of an archaic voice, of a sententious saying.

It was one of those stormy days in which winter makes its final resistance before admitting defeat. The gusts of the north wind furrowed the brush, while below on the Ponte della Pia, a dogwood rooted among the stones released to the winds the yellow down of its flowers.

Accompanied by the monotonous rhythm of the voice of the priest, more distant memories surfaced, as if it were Gherardo's duty to walk again all of the road that had brought him to this still incredible present; to justify how it was possible to find himself all at once linked to the people surrounding him, of whom a few months earlier he hadn't suspected the existence, facing a network of sentiments, of obligations, and the strange power carried by that word which he couldn't hear or even think without a shiver of fear, even of repugnance: *padrone* . . . master, owner, lord over the life and death, illness and health, present and future of all living creatures, young, old, halt, hale, quadru- and biped, into yet unborn generations, within his purview and nearly absolute power. It seemed that he could

measure, in the naive surprise in Boccini's look, the immensity of what had happened since the day of that casual encounter. His thoughts turned to Corinna: without having seen her enter he sensed that she was beside him, kneeling on the red bricks. And he smiled, although she, her head bowed, couldn't see him.

Suddenly, without reason, he was reminded of the day when he had decided to revisit with her the home of his grandparents, where he had passed vacations as a boy. Their cottage looked out over the plain of the Bisenio as far as the slopes of Montalbano. To the east, when it was clear, could be distinguished on the horizon the bell towers and dome of Florence. Behind, between the gray fields of olives, the house was bordered by a fringe of cypresses that led along a path to a steep, narrow valley with a thicket of brush at the bottom through which ran a perennial stream, diminished in times of drought to a trickle. His childhood recollections of that valley were indelibly imprinted on his spirit, although they had been stashed away in certain dusty corners of his memory, under the accumulation of more recent sensations. But now they reappeared clearly on the surface of his mind, and on remembering that savage valley he again experienced the sensations of those days: how he used to enjoy the burning heat of lonely sunny afternoons, how he used to join with the peasant children for pranks and games. He recalled a peasant girl who had appeared once, beautiful, all alone in a field of wheat. That visit had moved him but at the same time disappointed him. It wasn't

the same, the house, the countryside, that he had harbored in memory. His valley appeared to have narrowed, shortened; it was nothing more than a steep gully with dry branches on the bottom through which snaked a muddy dribble of a stream. It was toward the end of October; the fields had taken on that impoverished look of bare rows after the harvest when the grape leaves have fallen; the thin young oaks were yellowing. But then, when least expected, some forgotten image would come alive, though distant, as if child and youth had been reborn, and it seemed as if the protagonist in that memory was not himself, but rather someone who had been infinitely dear to him.

Perhaps that day a thread of his existence, interrupted for so long, had been reattached to his life in some mysterious way. And, as if in the emptiness of that vast plain the fog of so many uncertainties had dissipated, he felt freer, more resolute. There he had attained the courage for his decision.

It was as if a part of his being, the most important, the truest, had remained unknown, perhaps because he had never had the tenacity to look deeply, and had needed this spark to reveal and to recapture its command over his will, over his life. From this little valley, and from that little bridge in ruins in the wild gorge, had been formed the illogical and profound sentiment that little by little had overcome the obstacles of reason. To enjoy the fullness of life we must act, otherwise we remain spectators, intruders, passing through

life like the road that flanked the torrent and ran rapidly to the pass between one valley and the next, without being aware of the solitude through which it passed. And to pass thus strangers, spectators, among men and things, to let drop the thread of life before it tangles for fear of disturbing the course of our ordered existence, all through a reluctance that could be cowardice. What could develop into bonds, affections, actions, if left half way, unable to advance, recede and are lost. This is no way to live: one must get involved in life, model it like a material. And oneself. Not doing harm is not enough. Passive withdrawal is wrong. He could not have commanded these sentiments: they were the fruits of a solitary youth, a sullen adolescence. As the little car threaded its way through the bare winter fields he confided these ideas to Corinna, without other comment. Their hands sought each other to feel their closeness without disturbing their deep happiness, their faces cold in the chilly air and their bodies warm in their furs. In the enjoyment of opening to the person he loved he felt he could continue forever.

But he questioned the wisdom of his actions, not wanting to harbor illusions, and because he distrusted the curious sense of exhilaration that he derived from these thoughts. The cost of the estate was beyond his resources; he would need to maintain, at least in part, the old liens. An abandon more desolate, a disorder more complete, couldn't be imagined; everything would have to be rebuilt. Yet perhaps it had been this

very misery, this need, which had beckoned him. The need was to rebuild, to put in order; the fruits would come later. Cerreta was huge and beautiful; it offered a grand future for a man of good will. The impetus captured him. To restore prosperity to this land, to these people, that was a mission big enough for a life.

At forty, to find oneself changing the course of one's life! But maybe, early on, one doesn't see clearly. Not all are born to a vocation: some are those lucky ones who see clearly from the beginning; some are the thoughtless who through the force of inertia follow a rut even when it becomes obvious that it's going nowhere. He recalled his father's shock and sorrow, fifteen or twenty years earlier, when he had refused to follow in the family business. It had been painful not to be able to please him. The sad astonishment of the old man to realize, as if counter to nature, that he could not continue in the flesh of his son, made him suffer physically. But the grandparents, who had never been away from their little farms, who had been born there and would die there, had understood. In Gherardo the cycle of the generations was being completed: his father had abandoned the land for action, for adventure; in his turn he had left for study, for knowledge, for understanding; and now, as he approached his mature years, he was returning to the land. But what if this time it turned out to be just another brief enthusiasm like many that had seized him in the past, for a movement, a style, an artist? Corinna rose, turned toward him, and on seeing him so absorbed in thought

a shadow of a smile passed over her face, as if to say, "As usual!" This too was a great concern, Corinna at Cerreta. At the moment she was full of enthusiasm; everything appeared beautiful, picturesque as a mountain landscape in the summer. But Cerreta was not a vacation; it would take the dedication of a lifetime. If they had to stay here through the winter? To ask her wouldn't help. She would reply, "Whatever you think will be fine with me," or some such impulsive phrase that embarrassed him and rendered any close examination empty and useless. Words such as "sensible, balanced, strict" pleased Corinna; on hearing them her face would take on an unwonted but becoming gravity that gave her, when he started on a serious subject, a contrite look, as with an almost religious admiration she became more beautiful, even exalted. But then she would fall naturally and to his displeasure into worldly talk that created around her an aura of scepticism that left him upset.

Perhaps he was wrong to doubt her adaptability; perhaps these were just attitudes, appearances that were difficult to leave behind. In so many things she was so mature. In the city, when he insisted on attending those sparkling gatherings where people amused and entertained each other, he would sense in her a boredom, which aroused in him a certain uneasiness, and some bitterness, at finding himself despite his greater age seemingly so inexperienced compared to her who was so young. Thus now, beside her, among people from whom their elegant city clothes isolated

them as if from a separate world, his tormenting doubts returned. Without turning he felt, as if touching with his hand, that slim profile, intense, those mobile expressions, the curiosity of her lively gaze that contrasted with the somewhat forced seriousness that nowadays she assumed so often, almost habitually. She was the creature of another culture; it was as if he were carrying her back through time.

Why had he not known her earlier, in that ideal time frame when emotions flow freely, emotions whose echoes, when age is approaching, can no longer be recaptured? But these were the inconsistencies of life. Maybe earlier he would not have noticed her.

The bell rang for rising, followed by the shuffling of those who had been kneeling on the brick floor. Around him were the bowed heads of the little group; the headscarves of the women, the white heads of the elders, the younger men and youths leaning quietly against the wall. Gherardo felt overcome with a feeling of exaltation, almost religious. He wanted to ask for the faith, the strength to be wise and prudent in dealing with the future of the people who had been entrusted to him; but his dialog with God, his desire for prayer, groped for expression in an emptiness of faith. "Would I not be sinning through pride if I took on myself the right, I a mere human, to know Your hidden reasons, to know what You are, in Your form, in Your existence? You are too high, too great to be comprehended. Perhaps my doubt, my suffering, is the more humble, truer faith. Give me the strength to do

my duty." The invocation took on a strange truth, as of a vow, an offering.

From the corridor that led to the villa came, weak like the voice of a man's falsetto, the chords of an organ. Collecting himself, Gherardo became aware that Corinna was no longer next to him. Perhaps Corinna understood; she must have understood. The instrument had an uncertain voice, as if stammering or babbling. Who knows how many years it had slept undisturbed in that corridor. The tune was very simple, probably an old etude. Heads turned, then resumed their composed attitudes.

II

At the divide the road drops abruptly and enters the woods. On both sides rise dense walls of vegetation; not finding upward passage, the shoots and young plants are twisted back to earth, tortured into forms like the salt pines at the edge of the seashore, battered by the onshore wind.

"Look at the vigor of Cerreta's timber," foreman Ruggero pointed out. "It's two or three years since the last cut, and the trunks are already thick as a finger."

"But couldn't they be freed of all those thorn bushes that are suffocating them?"

"Yes sir, they could; everything is possible," Ruggero said looking at Gherardo as if he were omnipotent, "but it would take a lot of men to clean up. They're so extensive, the woods of Cerreta. And then, up here it doesn't make a lot of sense. There's the transport, expensive. We're far out, isolated. But when the time comes for a real harvest we'll do it right, cutting the undergrowth, clearing, raking, uprooting the heather, leaving the best trees as "mothers" to provide future seedlings. That way we'll train the forest. Whoever is here in fifteen or sixteen years. . . ."

"Fifteen years? We'll be old in fifteen years!"

"Yes sir, but these are ilex and arbutus, they grow slowly. It can't be helped. At the time of the Corporation everything was clear-cut. They were a commercial outfit interested only in short-term profit, with no respect for the land. Down with the high trees, with the seed stock. They left nothing but thorn bushes, heather, and juniper. There were twenty crews cutting. Such movement of mules, of carts; it looked like a party in the woods. Believe me, we suffered every time at the crash of those falling trunks that we had seen sprout; even the loggers, whose job it is, have respect for the forest, have it in their blood; they want to come back for other cuts. But the Corporation was mad to make money. And then they had the good taste to go broke."

"How did they fail, then?"

"Ah, it wasn't because of the estate, but who knows; administrators, employees, the money was never enough. So, down with the forest. On that hill there was a thicket of ilex so dense that no one ever entered alone. Look now."

A mudslide had torn a great gash in the steep cliff. Not finding a stable channel, the rainwater had eaten ever deeper into the side of the mountain.

"And after the failure, it was worse. It was agony. We were all wiped out. What would you expect? There was no one to turn to. It seemed impossible that things could get worse. Yet, you know, one adapts to everything. The people, as they began to give up hope, didn't know what would become of them. But

now, by God's will, you're here." Those brief touches, shrewd, fleeting.

"All things need a leader."

Entering the thicket, the horde of thorns, heather, and junipers that smothered the new shoots from the stumps in inextricable tangles seemed guided by a will. In the cool places, in the bogs, white poplars and black alders were contorted in an effort to create an opening toward air and light; unnaturally slender trunks bowed their heads under the weight of piles of fallen branches and ranunculus, defeated. In some the tender tips were drying, sick unto death; others managed to raise their heads above the brush, which sent off creepers in an attempt to recapture them and hold them down again.

"Look, look what a beautiful tree this was!"

At the corner of the crossroad, under a tuft of foliage, enormous rough shoots wound like great half-buried serpents from a cut stump. At the level of the cut, like a rough-hewn table, could be seen the marks of the saw, the notches of the axe, the mark of the last tear when the tree fell. But from everywhere, from the roots themselves and from all around the center, as if hastening to hide that slaughter, vigorous suckers swarmed a couple of meters high to combine in a matted mass, giving the illusion of a single plant.

At the bottom of the descent, the road loses itself in the clear waters of a little creek called the Filicaie. Beyond, a path ramps up the hill into a chestnut grove. Among the old trees dressed in the down of ancient

vegetation filtered a green light, mild as the familiar sound of the water trickling down the ferns onto the flint pebbles. Corinna held her hands up to the wrists in the water until she felt a fresh vigor spread through all her body.

Beyond the river, scattered along the slope, was a flock of pastured sheep. It seemed that no one was minding them, until Gherardo noticed that beyond, screened by a curtain of alders, a ragged little girl was lining up a row of stones. She would search for them here and there, place them a few feet apart, then hop from one to the other to the end of the line, add a rock to the line and start the game again. Unseen, Gherardo stood still for a bit to watch her, taken by he knew not what strange attraction. In that little deprived body he sensed something of premature age, of withering. The legs, skinny to the point of looking rickety below a too-short smock, aroused compassion and almost repulsion. And on the bent head, that halo of blond hair, curly. Finally, at a shuffling of his horse, the child turned, saw him, and with a timid reaction threw her smock over her head, as if by not seeing him he could not see her. But a moment later, as if remembering her job, she ran away, shouting, "My sheep!" Profiting by her distraction, the herd had invaded a field of young alfalfa, beautifully green from the latest rain; they were avidly gorging. But it was a dangerous feast; they were stuffing themselves to the bursting point. Now, frenetically, she chased them through a gate with a long stick.

"Who is your mother?" Gherardo asked.

The child looked at him, confused. She seemed to be searching her mind. Then she stammered: "Teresa of Castiglion, but I'm the shepherd at Montecchio, of the Vagheggini."

And she looked at him, dumbfounded.

"She's retarded, poor thing," said Ruggero as they walked away. "But what can you expect, in this desolate place?" Gherardo and Corinna looked at each other, a bit shocked at the indifference with which he said it.

They climbed a small hill; the view broadened; the valley widened. Across its flat bottom extended neat fields, interrupted by unplowed areas along the course of the Ricassa that were criss-crossed with junipers and thorn bushes. "Down below there are two farms, Casanova and Anterigoli. The *padrone* knows them." From his tone of voice it was apparent that Ruggero didn't think they amounted to much. Gherardo asked him to point out their boundaries.

"From here you can't see the boundaries; they go beyond that ridge."

"Then all that we see is part of Cerreta?"

"Yes sir."

They stayed for several moments looking around at the circle of hills. Then, passing over a rise, they found themselves in an old grove of ilex that had not been cut because, Ruggero said, the Corporation hadn't gotten to it before going broke. In the darkness beneath the boughs the trunks had been twisted through

time into long, imposing shapes. Soon they came to a spring where an old woman was washing clothes; she looked up, then after a silence greeted them submissively. Gherardo felt an impulse to question her, but a certain sense of modesty, and a wish not to pry into a probably pitiful story, held him back. Rounding a bend they found themselves facing an isolated fortress on a hill.

A robust ogive arch, still intact, opened on a court of the ruined old castle. The massive tower, the surrounding wall, the external stairway, and the walks still exist, reduced to skeletons in rough travertine. In places, branches of ilex besiege the walls; the rugged stained face of the mass of the mountain looms behind. Along the ridge, confused with rocky outcrops, wander the mossy ruins of many thick walls leading down to the confluence of the two valleys that the castle commands. Beyond, black thickets close in the absolute solitude. Not a house, not a field, not a sign of the hand of man. The circle of the forest seems to enclose an ancient past, as if for protection.

"This is Castiglioni, ma'am, il castiglion che dio sol sa. For centuries it's been called the castle that only God knows, a place that everyone else has forgotten. The old ones say that a hundred or more people used to live within those ruined walls."

In the middle of the arch a woman appeared. Her clothes and ageless face, animated by a life so different from theirs, made her seem to strengthen rather than to dissipate the illusion of the place. She seemed like a



like a figure in a nativity scene in the apse of some ancient parish church. Like a sculpture by the hand of some unknown artisan, beneath her sharp, penetrating humility she concealed a profound dignity. She was tall and strong-boned, something rare in the region, where the ancient stock tended to be skinny, concealing a tough robustness.

Teresa, these are the padroni,” said Ruggero. Gherardo was glad he hadn’t said the new padroni.

They passed under the arch, fearful of disturbing who knew what ancient peace that might have the right to evict them, or worse, to ignore them. The atmosphere of legend was becoming real, taking on a tangible form. Above the wall that seemed a part of the bedrock the rim of the hills appeared. In the middle of a courtyard rose the tower, dominating the valleys, hard and threatening.

“Gherardo,” ventured Corinna, “it looks like Sleeping Beauty’s castle.” But then she realized that the image was too rich for that bare stony skeleton.

The woman led them to a hole that once must have been a door. To pass through, one had to go down on all fours. They leaned down, looked into the dark.

“Go ahead.”

That request for them to enter, with that soft and tranquil voice, was an invitation, and they accepted it as such. But it would be easy to stumble; the floor inside was lower.

Once used to the darkness, their eyes could just distinguish a bed and the forms of a table and a *madia*,

or flour chest, the combination worktable and cupboard used for making and storing bread. On the wall shone machetes and pruning hooks. Their shoes stuck to the moist dirt floor. The air was cold and humid, filled with the shut-in smell of mildew. There were no windows. The sun, by now low on the horizon, penetrated through the door-hole as into a grotto. When they went back outside, shadows had invaded the valleys; before long they too would be in the dark.

Out from the ilex came a figure that could be distinguished from the earth only by its movement. It was the old woman they had met at the spring. She stopped in front of them and opened her hands in offering: in each she had an egg.

"They're really warm. I got them just this minute from the nest. If you pierce them and suck them right away they're good, and very healthy."

The younger woman, erect under the arch, was viewing the evening rising from the valley. She didn't move; her face was without expression. She must once have been beautiful. Gherardo asked her, "Are there no men?"

Teresa answered, "My man has gone away, to France. I haven't heard from him for many years. I also have a son, Amedeo, but now he's in the service. And I have a daughter who's at Montecchio to herd the sheep. We're two women alone."

"Aren't you afraid to be alone?" asked Corinna.

"What could they do to us? No one ever comes up here. At first, we were bothered at night by the bark-

ing of the foxes down in the gullies, and by the owls in the tower who are tormented like the damned whenever the weather changes. But there are no people. The moles, from the beginning, would dance on the bed. But one gets used to anything in this world.

“And in winter?”

“Actually, it’s the best season. There are chestnuts to gather, and acorns, and berries. When the Corporation was cutting there was also work for us, making charcoal. The worst is in March, when the bad weather simply won’t quit. Then it’s difficult; we need to go and search for work, and it’s a long trip from here to the farms, to Montorsaio, to Pian di Feccia, to Marmoraia; it’s miles and miles.”

Gherardo turned to look at the foreman, who shrugged his shoulders. “The guard Pasquale found them here in the time of Count Ulderigo. They must have lived here a long time. In town they had been evicted, couldn’t pay the rent. Here on the estate no one cares; in this hovel they don’t bother anyone. And Teresa was known; she was from Brenna.” Brenna is a gray group of houses that the Merse leaves behind on the last slopes in its hurry to run to the fertile plain, freeing itself from the savage thickets that close in on the Castiglioni. “The young count was in Rome and did nothing but ask for money. If it had been in the time of Countess Adelaide — now there was a great lady. If you had seen Cerreta then, padrone, you really would have been pleased. Everyone who came here said, ‘There’s no equal to the forests of Cerreta.’”

"But we can't let people live in there, in that," interrupted Gherardo. The foreman stepped back. The women glanced at each other, frightened. Then Teresa said humbly, "It's not half bad here at Castiglioni. The chestnut grove is good. Mother has a garden at the spring. When we're not feeling well we can always find an egg in the henhouse. We're poor, yes." A moment of silence passed.

"They're not going to kick us out, are they?" In her voice there was no trace of fear, as if she was already resigned.

"No, no," said Gherardo distractedly, lost in thought, "but. . . ."

"By now we're used to living down here. And to change . . . The first winter was hard, but then . . ." She turned toward the old woman, who nodded her agreement.

"It snowed so much. It hadn't ever snowed so much in all my life."

"If God wills it," continued Teresa "there's wood for everyone and it costs only the trouble to collect it. But to find work in those days was painful. Now, we do better; they know us on the farms. We would gladly have eaten a bit more bread in those years; the chestnut flour becomes boring after a while. We would pay in barter to get something extra: a sack of flour, a dozen eggs, a pound of oil. But you know, the more you need the more people take advantage of you. And when the wind comes from the north up through these valleys the season gets bitter. But you know what

they say, the devil is not as ugly as he's painted. You get used to things, and then it's easy. You learn that when you're miserable, or hungry, just wait a while. Then there are so many resources in the forest, when one has learned to take advantage of them. And there's the garden, and the chestnuts."

Little by little, in the dusk, the women were opening up. Like water that melts from the snow in the spring, in the warmth of sympathy the pain of so many years was gradually released. The sad story became sweet as a mournful tune. Only sad stories can be so human.

Corinna asked about the child they had found with the sheep, at the river.

"She is sixteen, you know, Virginia. But she's never grown."

The women had been able to adapt; and also the son, who had gone early to the woods as a lumberjack; but the girl stopped growing and had turned inward, like those plants that, browsed by goats, become sterile and develop the thick hard trunks of dwarves. When she was little and they all went out to work they would tie her to a bedpost so that she wouldn't come to any harm being home alone. It was heartbreaking, that little creature, alone in the house. At sixteen she was about the size of a twelve-year-old, and had the intelligence of a little child. She would sit on a rock and stay for hours and hours looking at the sky, mumbling words that no one understood. As the seasons changed her nature changed. Some days she didn't

want to see anyone, on others she couldn't talk. With her little formless body, in the mud-colored rags that covered her, that little innocent frightened face looked into a world they didn't know, with those dark, shiny eyes, always fear-filled. She didn't want to wash, and at night she didn't want to undress, as she went to bed between the two women.

When the Vagheggini, the farmers of Montecchio, came to ask if she could tend their sheep, at first Teresa didn't want to let her go, thinking she should bear her own troubles, then she was persuaded that it would be good to try to change the girl's life. Up here she was sad; it could be that she would improve, in different surroundings. After a short period of shyness, charmed by the lambs, Virginia took over the flock in ecstasy.

"We'd better get going," said Ruggero, looking at the sky. Above the tower dark clouds were gathering, who knew from where. "We don't want to have a downpour catch us in the woods." Reluctantly they again took the curving path among the rocks, under the ilex branches bent to the ground. With the discretion Gherardo had already had occasion to appreciate in the people of this area, the foreman proceeded a little way ahead, leaving them alone.

"You'll have to work out something for those women, Gherardo," said Corinna as if scolding him. "I'm afraid I won't be able to sleep in peace in my bed, thinking of them in that cave at night."

"That's easier said than done. The houses at Cer-

reta are all occupied; people would refuse to make room." He called Ruggero, "About those women, what's the story?"

"Women's business. I knew Anselmo well, Teresa's husband. He was a no-good, the type who doesn't know how to resist a skirt or a glass of wine. But Teresa really wanted him. When women take a fancy. . . "

Rounding a curve, above on the dark road they saw a dark shadow pedaling laboriously up the hill.

"Who's that?"

"It's the priest. He's been trapping the migrating birds that return here. It's his passion, bird hunting. He carries an owl with him . . ."

"Ah, yes?"

"He's a good guy, you know, Don Vanzetti. And he can take a joke."

Corinna changed the subject back: "But those women?"

"One summer a girl who had gone in service to the padroni of Montorsaio returned to the village. They had taken her to Rome, but in the city she changed employers, then changed jobs. She was heading for trouble, to judge by the luxury, the clothes. From childhood she and Anselmo had been sweethearts, typical kids who grew up together. She was one of those who had it in her blood. That summer, when it was the season for grain cutting in the Maremma, Anselmo went down with the crew. They do that, the woodcutters, and when they've finished the harvest

there they come back to cut up toward the Senese, where the wheat matures later. But when the gang returned, Anselmo didn't show up. It was said that they were seen together in Siena, he and that girl. And from that time on nothing has been known of him."

"In the village, what else could they do, it's a place of poor people, and when one can't pay. . . . As a child Teresa used to play around Castiglioni, and when she found herself without a roof she thought of that grotto. They're miserable, padrone, but there are so many in the world. And when an estate has no management. . . . At the fattoria farm center they didn't do anything; the count only cared about his own pleasure. She was allowed the run of the chestnut grove of Rio-vivo; some winters they lived on that. Then came the Corporation; they only thought of cutting the timber. Then they went broke. Well, it's a free country; he who has something to eat eats, and he who hasn't, too bad."

In the silence that fell between them he repeated, shaking his head: "Misery, misery!" They reached the pebbly banks of Filicaie creek. Ruggero looked at the sky; above the hills the first stars were showing. "The storm has turned. But beyond the hills of Marmoraia it will rain. Most times, with a northwest wind, it does."

III

Gherardo stayed only a moment with Corinna, just time enough to drink a cup of too-hot tea. Then, in a hurry, he went to the farm center, the Fattoria, where he had much to do. She saw very little of Gherardo in those days; he was always on the go. It was natural that he was so busy; he didn't want to make mistakes. Everything was new to him, and he was afraid to rely too much on the guard and the foreman, although he could hardly do it all himself.

But Corinna was not bored, didn't feel lonesome; perhaps it was good for her to be alone. Actually she wasn't alone; the house was alive with the presence of Anna, who she would meet in the corridors, silent and quick, busy putting linens in closets, airing, opening and closing rooms. She attended to her business without asking anything, as if following a rule that the succession of generations and transfer of property must change nothing. And perhaps she understood that to Corinna domestic things weren't very important. For curiosity Corinna had followed her into the pantry. In the clean, dark little room, fragrant with the odor of fruit, were stored the preserved gifts of the earth. Thin hams of range pigs hung from the ceiling; small hard

forms of pecorino cheese lay on the tables; there were strings of dried mushrooms; baskets of dried apples, pears, and figs; jars of black olives; piles of walnuts and hazelnuts. She heard a clucking of chickens beyond the piazza, below the wall that looked down on the valley of the Rigolenso. Along toward evening Anna would throw feed to the chickens.

Within the length of yellow scarf that, in the style of the region, enclosed her black hair at the temples, Anna's thin pallid face stood out as in a frame. Delicate of build, part of her humility showed in her way of walking, modest and shuffling, as if constrained by a physical defect. Meeting her in the dark corridors, with that silent walk, her diaphanous face seemed insubstantial; it was distressing to see her. To stay in the service of the counts she had stripped herself of the morose air so typical of those solitary people, with their resistance to human contact that can be a form of unsociable but graceful pride. She had become humble, not with that humility that surrounds itself with suspicion like spines for not being cultured, rather with a modesty that didn't have the acute offensive character of militant virtue. Seeing her for the first time, Gherardo had said to himself, "She's a Sassetta." And in fact she did resemble those thin, spare creatures of the poetic Sienese painter. She was interesting to watch, and hearing her speech, in that sing-song that does not soften but joins words lazily and rhythmically, he seemed to find himself back in the schoolroom, when in sleepy afternoons at the begin-

ning of summer, the air vibrant with dust, they would carefully pronounce a harmoniously prolix passage of Manzoni. But toward that silent and secure manner Corinna developed a certain diffidence, perhaps because Anna knew so well by herself what to do, without ever asking. It made her feel a growing emptiness, superfluous, of little use. And Gherardo had things to do.

Even though the sun had not yet set behind the mountain, the shadow-filled valleys sent up a coolness that still suggested winter. Little by little, in the soft light, things faded into shadow, appeared to recede in the distance, to become indifferent and inimical. During her introspective moments a sadness would invade her from which even Gherardo had difficulty arousing her. At other times, however, she let herself live without thought, without speculation, and then she surprised herself wanting to sing, feeling like a happy child.

Her initial apprehension about her marriage, about the permanence of that knot, the obligation, the duty, the vast space of a lifetime, had been replaced by a vague sense of a life that was coming together in preparation for a solid and more important tomorrow. She had been afraid of spoiling the precious friendship that had blossomed between them. When she had first met Gherardo, he found gathered around her age group of young people different from those with whom he had grown up, with other ways, other interests; when she took up with him she had put them

aside. The subdued and subtle search for pleasure that had previously been enough, had been fulfilling, had with time become a desolate monotony. She had become sated with that life, with perpetual change that in the end was always the same, like a wheel that spins without going anywhere. She knew her companions too well; she didn't want to meet more of the same. It was difficult to link her life of yesterday with what lay ahead. They had already put aside the past that she was shaking off with difficulty. On her own, with no guidance, she had had to find the way, to rescue herself. Must everyone find his own way, single-handed, without the aid of others, even family? Should she perhaps forget her youth, cancel it out, not remember it except with a sense of bitterness and blame?

No one was enthusiastic about her marriage, and even she had had her doubts. Her father was not happy to see his beloved daughter take a man of forty; then go to live in isolation in the country, a city person by birth and instinct! The mother, already having drunk the bitterness of not seeing her make the brilliant marriage on which she had counted, could feel only a sense of relief to see her at least married; maybe that's the congenital desire of all mothers. From Corinna herself, with a character resistant to rules, unsubmitive to convention, they expected the worst. Gherardo's family, if you could call that of his brother Roberto his family, certainly didn't see her approvingly. They were so different in every way, utterly conventional. She smiled, thinking about it. What she

feared most of all was to see herself absorbed into the humdrum routines of family life, which might overshadow the delicate pleasure, the restful intimacy with Gherardo. And, although this thought remained somewhat nebulous, she feared that the physical act of love might be fatal to the best part of their affection, that it would become sluggish, enervated. At the same time she recognized that their sentiments lacked the acute instincts of passion and desire that she had, if not experienced, at least sensed with others. In a certain obscure way, she would have been ashamed to admit to herself the sensual thrill that accompanied these thoughts. It was still possible to imagine being loved carnally by other men, but between her and Gherardo, in the consummation of pleasure, she had felt that the best might be over. Now these fears appeared far away, not that they were fully resolved. In a way that she hadn't been able to understand, they remained ahead on the road that was still to be traveled.

By now it was dark. The last details of the landscape were lost in the ilex, beyond Boscogrosso and Montemaggiori. Not a light, not a voice, not a sound. She had never seen so much of the earth in its solitude, without a sign of human life. And Gherardo hadn't returned. With a shiver she entered the house. In her spirit of uncertainty, certain feelings about the rooms, of their hostility or their welcome, were being indelibly printed, just as the memory of a view retains only a few particulars that distinguish and evoke it over the years. The house, an amalgam of ancient tow-

ers united in a series of past renovations, could not manage to lose, under the veneer of great wallpaper flowers that were beginning to peel from the walls, a square solemn sense of proper proportion, just as a good picture disfigured by retouching still evidences the hand of the master. Along the corridors one would meet the harmony of a stone arch, partially obscured by plaster. The thickness of the walls commanded respect.

Through a glass door Corinna entered a vast room. Twilight filtered through the drapes. The carved furniture of a flowery style popular fifty or so years ago, seeking to hide its function under the disheveled lines of childish convulsions of engravings and sad reliefs painful to those who suddenly sat down in the chairs, became inoffensive lost in that great space. In a bookcase, among bundles of old newspapers, she leafed distractedly through a variety theater review. The singers, the ballerina, were shown in provocative poses that the old-fashioned styles rendered good-naturedly ridiculous. In a corner she tried turning the handle of an old mechanical piano. Out came a shrill cascade of thin notes that made her let go suddenly, as if her hand had been burned.

Anna entered with an oil lamp. The yellow light that furrowed her features showed only the fragile grace of her smile. The lamp that she carried was a complicated object of white majolica; around the column that supported its vase and lampshade a gentleman in very tight tailcoat and a woman with a long

train and a plumed hat were making deep bows.

Placed on the table, it seemed that in that cone of light, in that brightly lit little scene surrounded by the shadows of the vaulted ceiling decorated with plaster coats of arms and crowns, the room and the house were concentrated. She couldn't tear her eyes away from it. But then she felt a presence behind her. She turned. A white dog, very old, had put his muzzle through the partly open door, sniffing, looking around. In fear of a shout or a kick it had stopped at the threshold and looked in with tired and resigned eyes. Then with bowed head it wagged its tail a bit and came nearer with cautious steps. Arriving in front of her, it again looked up. Finally, persuaded of its safety, it stretched out at her feet and, after a pat, began to wag its tail strongly with a loud thumping on the floor.

IV

Gherardo rose early; by daybreak he was usually on horseback. On the farm he had found a good-natured Maremma horse — they called her the old girl — that the years had brought to just the right point for his modest abilities as a horseman, although she had her ways that had to be respected. In his continuous interest in everything, Gherardo sometimes forgot that he was on horseback. The old girl was nursing a colt, and, especially if he was out longer than usual, he would feel her growing agitation; at every curve, at every path, she tried to turn around, until, on the way back, nearing home, he could no longer control her, and they would arrive in a triumphant gallop, with frenetic neighing between mother and colt from outside and inside the stable. On long rides the udder would fill with milk to the point of doing harm. Eventually Gherardo decided to bring the colt along, and that worked very well; in fact, it gave him a happy feeling to hear the colt trotting freely behind.

Corinna, though she woke early — and how could she not when they went to bed before dark — made a point of passing the morning hours in bed, reading or amusing herself with making lace, or even doing

nothing, bored, but not without enjoyment. It was a leftover from her old habits, now tinged with different colors; all she had to do was open the windows for a revelation every morning. A fresh desire to live entered the room on those spring mornings; she found herself caught up in the impetus of a new adolescence. For that was certainly her most lively impulse, to renew herself physically, like the oak that loses the dry leaves that it has carried all winter when it puts on the new. She felt herself an ingénue, a young girl again.

She had given up the bright-colored silk clothes it had been her fashion to wear. The monks of Montieri, who by ancient custom passed every now and then through the farm to beg flour, dried chestnuts, wine, and oil, had made her some dresses of batiste material with edges and flocking of lace, of a cut that was nowadays out of style, but that precisely suited her spiritual moment. In the fresh touch of the white coarse linen she felt herself reborn.

Usually Gherardo would return in mid-morning to have breakfast with her. She couldn't help noticing that Gherardo was more careful than he used to be in his dress, more so than in the city. But he didn't do it for her, it was because he was aware of the importance of dress for his subordinates; not only did they respect him more naturally, but it seemed to do them honor before strangers, like a mother no longer young who still takes care of her appearance so that her children will not be ashamed of her. He needed to give his dependents that little reason for pride in their boss.

He had had corduroy hunting clothes made, of ordinary material but well cut, which on his still slim build gave him an easy-going but distinguished air. He habitually wore boots of fine black leather, which pleased Corinna immensely. She noted with amusement, though without comment, the steps in his evolution, accompanied by so many of those human weaknesses that in a loved one are dearer than rigorous perfection.

Anna brought breakfast. The bread had the aroma of walnuts; the taste of goat's milk was, every morning, a surprise. Fresh eggs, dark honey in the comb. Anna had a habit of decorating the tray with whatever flowering plant seemed beautiful to her, with some early blossoms from the forest, perhaps only a budding twig of oak, or an imperious yellow tuft of broom. Over her lips ran fleeting tremors of a smile that Gherardo looked forward to catching, in passing.

"Everything from Cerreta," said Gherardo. "If through some cataclysm, pestilence, or other — and who would expect a contagion to reach here — with Cerreta cut off from the rest of the world, we could do very well on our own. What necessity would be lacking?" It was true. He frequently made that comment. Of all the hours of the day, Corinna preferred this interlude, her private time with Gherardo. It was always sad for her when it ended, while Gherardo, called by this or that business or simply by the desire to go out, was sometimes impatient and eager to leave, though he tried not to let her see it.

But every day it became more evident that there was not in any unit of time — hour, day, month — enough space to do justice to everything. Imperiously, with the spasms of all its open wounds, Cerreta and its problems absorbed him. Yet it was also his duty to help Corinna through these early days. They needed time to cultivate their relationship, to learn to know each other. Above all, they felt deeply the need for empty time just to be together, saturated with interior happiness, avoiding anything that intruded from outside.

Quietly, like the collision of two wills, Gherardo began to feel Cerreta's struggle between order and disorder. If he had thought that it would be sufficient to be guided by the latent love of nature that in one stroke had taken over from his other tendencies, now he had to think again. In the blind clairvoyance of instinct he had come to the rescue of the great exhausted creature that had shown him its suffering, rushed to put it in harness. But before daring to apply remedies, the most elementary wisdom demanded that he truly understand the problems. It was necessary to take detailed account of everything, to see clearly where he wanted to go. For this a full year would be needed, the complete cycle of the seasons. But in practice he found himself confronted with problems so urgent that they did not admit delay: houses in decay, fields that were becoming hard and overgrown, empty stables, livestock old and sick, the poverty of the peasants who had been left on their own, sick with

the incurable laziness of those who see no results from their efforts. The disorder, the abandonment, the misery, the fruits of long, bad husbandry, filled him with an irresistible impatience to go to work with his own hands to rebuild the walls, to plow the overgrown fields. But where to start? Wherever he turned everything was begging for help.

Then there was, not least, the financial problem to be responsibly considered before launching into the huge expenses that the improvements would require. And the worst was that, considering the complexity of the problems and his own inexperience, he could not make precise estimates. Confronting the need to act, as necessary as breathing, he felt himself cruelly impotent. He did not know the disillusionments yet to come and had not yet learned that all love, even that of the earth, has its pains, and that earth, like the material of the artist, doesn't yield without resistance to the will of man. But soon the very nature of things began to reveal hidden dangers so subtle and so numerous, and often so contradictory, that he became convinced that alone he could not possibly sort them out. So he started in search of that great rarity, a good manager.

Ruggero did his best to persuade him there was no need. With the fine instinctive tact he hid under his brusque manner, he insinuated that the two of them would be enough. "It's a question of logic," he said. "We've got the experience." According to him a manager from another place would not do well here, where in addition to different soils, it would be necessary to

struggle against the ancient habits of the people. And it's more difficult to conquer people than soil.

On the other hand Gherardo, who more than anything considered himself bound to fight the laziness that bordered on degradation, didn't want to depend on those who had accepted it; he wanted someone who would root it out. So he looked up an old farmer friend, went to see him and explained what he needed, the talents that this manager must possess.

"My friend, managers of this caliber are all in paradise, administering God's properties, but down here I've never known one. If you find one, get him for me. I would settle for much less."

Finally the director of an agricultural school indicated a man known to him, highly expert, especially in setting up new management. A man who had been everywhere, had worked in every type of organization, and thus had a varied experience and a vast knowledge of various subjects. And middle aged, not too old and not too young. Gherardo agreed to have him come to Cerreta, and one morning in June when drought was beginning to dry out the uplands, returning home at noon he found him in the piazza of the villa.

The first impression was not favorable. He was a man of around fifty; he appeared to affect a certain earthiness of expression, although it was clear that, if needed, he knew how to do better. Although at the time this style surprised Gherardo, basically it didn't displease him. But without clearly saying so to himself just then, later when he was alone and with a cool

mind he began to wonder at the submissive manner of the people toward this man, of the guards and especially of the foreman, though perhaps it was simply that they respected Mastiani's ideas.

"You haven't had time to see anything yet," he said with a welcoming smile to the new arrival.

Mastiani smiled. "True, not very much, but I can see right away what the situation is; it jumps out at you. Sir, with such situations it is always difficult and puzzling. Even though I'm used to the most difficult problems, I would need to get oriented before giving an opinion."

Gherardo listened carefully; here was an intelligent man, he could see.

"We are facing, not a single problem, but a complex of problems that are all interconnected and stem from the same origin, the problem that faces all properties in disorder: environmental difficulties."

Pronouncing the word: en-vi-ron-men-tal, he scanned the syllables with the satisfaction of the poet whose rhyme has finally come together, just right, true. Beyond its common meaning, in truth not very precise, the expression acquired a mysterious significance. Gherardo was taken aback. This concept, he considered, could hold the key to all his difficulties. He called Corinna; facing an important decision, it appeared that he had drawn a lucky hand.

Mastiani greeted her with the exaggerated respect of one who, while recognizing and wishing to demonstrate his own inferior position, knows full well that

this accident of fortune could well be reversed were their positions based on intrinsic quality and intellectual capacity. In analogy to that obsequious yet condescending manner Corinna recalled a similar case, a waiter in a Roman hotel who was said to be a Russian prince. Mastiani's style did not dispose her to any special friendliness. And she, who had really become prodigal in her smiles and handshakes with the farmers and woodcutters, with whom she dealt nowadays in a manner of natural familiarity if not of equality, was inclined to maintain with Mastiani a certain reserve, not too sure of the correct distance.

"Now then, as we were saying, environmental problems. And here we need to distinguish: the housing environment, the farm environment, the land environment, and unfortunately there is the human environment. I need not emphasize that up here they are all at the same level. I have only made a quick circuit of the property, but that was enough. There's a farm back there, on the plateau, a big farm, I've seen it, and the land is not too bad. It's that red soil, a bit thin but loose, that, with help, will be productive. I talked with the little man who lives there, he and a family of women. It's not humanly possible for him to cultivate that farm alone. So they abandon the least productive and most distant fields, and hurriedly and incompletely cultivate the others. The remedy: a family that has enough manpower. But a family of the type I have in mind, of the type needed to farm that land, wouldn't be satisfied to live in a house that's falling to

pieces like that one. Thus, second, or rather first because that's where one needs to start, the housing environment: renovate the house. Once the family is properly housed, work animals are needed, at least two pairs. But the stable isn't adequate for more than those two has-been old oxen it would be better be without. They haven't got breath enough to pull a plow."

"In summary, everything must be changed, and in some cases change is not enough; better to demolish and rebuild. It will be necessary to face a few years of sacrifice, break the vicious circle, then the wheel will start rolling and will take care of itself. Sir, I don't know your financial situation" — he stopped and looked at Gherardo questioningly, as if expecting a precise account of his economic condition — "but to put an operation of this type on its feet will take a lot of money. I don't know how much you paid," again he stopped and again this time, seeing that he wasn't obtaining the desired information, after a pause continued, "but if you will permit me to speak with that frankness that is my style and that I am certain will bring to our relationship an agreeable sense of mutual confidence," and tasting the pleasure of this modern way of dealing between boss and agent, smiled with satisfaction, "I'm certain that you've done a bad piece of business."

Extremely surprised, Gherardo didn't know what to say except "I wouldn't know, really"

He felt submerged under that vast flood of knowledge; this last blow had disoriented him, left him breathless.

"But yes," insisted Mastiani, "and I'll explain why. You have bought a huge property; the acreage tempted you. It happens to the layman. Sir, in a purchase you have to look at what there is inside, not just the surface. And here, permit me to tell you with sincerity," and leaning out over the wall of the piazza, embracing the valleys and the wooded hills in the triumphant gesture of an orator who dominates a crowd, "here, there is very little."

With these last accents, vibrating like sabers in a salute after a fencing assault, they realized that the lesson was finished. They felt the farewell tone of the last words of a drama, just before the curtain falls. And there was indeed, curiously, something of the artist in the man, in his style that was just a little arrogant. Before Gherardo there opened on all sides dismaying horizons of a knowledge that inspired in him more respect than passion. Corinna could not suppress some feelings of lively antipathy toward the man, and when Gherardo asked her, "What do you think?" she only answered with an ambiguous gesture, as if the matter did not concern her, while Gherardo felt his enthusiasm diluted with a prick of doubt, a sense of rancor toward the contempt that Mastiani had shown for Cerreta. It was difficult for him to reconcile his admiration for such knowledge with his loving faith in his own land.

V

The first job Gherardo wanted to tackle was Castiglioni; remorse about those women was eating at him. But beset with problems closer to home and easier to resolve, he had not returned to the old castle, though not a day passed that he didn't rebuke himself about it, and promise himself again to go there, if it was impossible today then tomorrow. Every time, on the road to Causa, that he saw the dark tower against its black hill of ilex, he asked himself with disquiet what was happening with those women, alone, isolated. But there was always some urgent job that took priority. Now, however, with the arrival of Mastiani, they began to develop a definite schedule, taking into consideration all the many problems of the estate.

Gherardo had thought it would be enough to renovate two or three floors in the tower. That was not a big job: look after the roof, fix the external stairway in the courtyard, repair the floors and walls. But Mastiani had easily convinced him to the contrary. "Sir," (this style of address, habitual to Mastiani, was beginning to get on his nerves), "once you have restored Castiglioni, what will you have? A hopeless pair who will die of hunger making a home in the depths of those woods.

For the estate, those homeless women represent expense and nothing more. They're a burden. Besides, restoring Castiglioni is no minor project. There's no road; everything would have to be carried in by mule, fifty bricks at a time plus two sacks of sand and the lime; can you imagine it? Stone is not lacking, that's true; there's enough to build a town. And even if you do this as a charity for those women, and do it properly, the result is nothing. What's needed is to give them work, work appropriate to their abilities, so they can maintain themselves."

And he was right; what was worse, Mastiani was always right. The work on the Fattoria and living areas was more pressing. "Look," he lectured, "in everything one must begin at the center, in the heart. What will we do with the increased harvest if we don't have space ready to store it? We can't just leave it to rot on the ground. All the facilities of the Fattoria are in disrepair. Then, with your permission, we'll need to patch up and improve those two miserable rooms for my family; they're in a frightful state, in which no civilized woman would be willing to live." Considering this logic, Gherardo was unable to say no.

As soon as word spread that masons were working on the estate everyone began coming — farmers, woodcutters, laborers, tenants — to ask for repairs on their houses. And they were all urgent: floors that danced, lofts in danger of collapse, beams held up by props, holes in the cobbled floors of stables that people could navigate but that could cripple animals. Of

roof and wall problems there was no end. Everyone asked to have his house looked over before winter. Gherardo was beginning to see that all this must reflect an ingrained laziness. If he had found himself in those conditions he would have managed to shift a few tiles and seal up a window to protect himself from the weather. But negligence breeds laziness. He didn't really blame these wretches, the fault was with those who had directed them and the times through which they had lived.

The logistical problems were endless. In the first place they needed to make the lime, and in order to do that, first of all repair the kiln, one of whose beams had collapsed, then dig the lime, collect the bundles of brush, and fire the kiln. And when it came to transporting thousands of bundles by roads reduced to riverbeds by the rains, things became more complicated. Then one must think of materials. The brick kiln, like everything else made at Cerreta in that thriving period that must have flowered eighty to a hundred years before, was of beautiful construction. But in the body of the kiln an enormous crack had appeared, which if left uncorrected would split the kiln in two from top to foundation. Once the bricks were made, providing that all went well, it would be necessary to wait for the Rosia flow to recede to secure the sand left by the flood, sand that all the farms of the neighborhood needed and that belonged by ancient tradition to whoever staked it out, perhaps with only an upright stick in a pile of sand. Amid all this disorder that rule

was respected to the letter in the interest of all; a single infraction would not be tolerated.

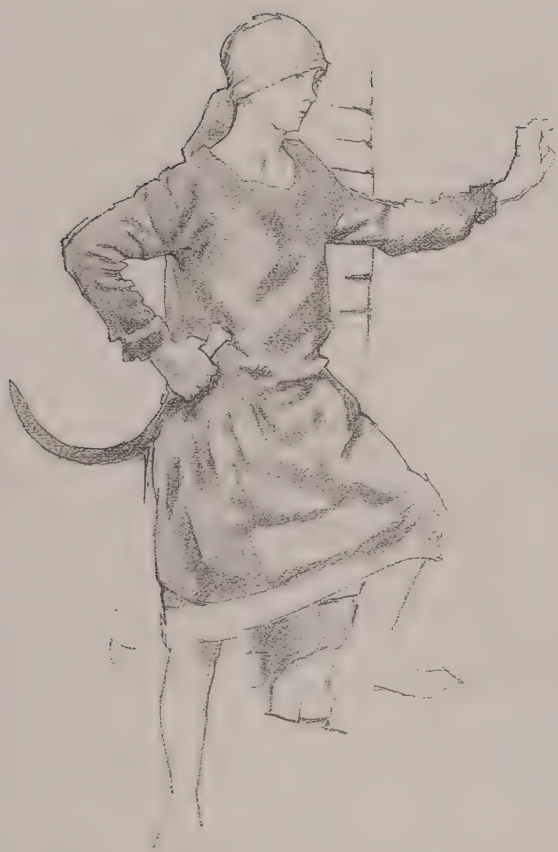
This business of doing everything with Cerreta's own resources gave Gherardo a fine feeling of self-sufficiency. Everything came from the earth, from his earth. But what hard work it was to put the great rusty machine back in motion! And the more impatient he became, the more it was as if an enemy was putting spokes in his wheels. When some urgent transport was needed, the first link in the chain, that's when the horses went lame, a stone wall collapsed into the road, or a worker took off sick. It seemed as if things didn't want to be disturbed, and conspired blindly against his good intentions, to wear him down.

However much he enjoyed working in the office to elaborate with Mastiani the ambitious plans that would sooner or later lift Cerreta to parity with farms nearer to major cities, Gherardo never gave up his solitary rides. If Mastiani expressed the intention of going with him to inspect a field, a house, or a stable, he tried to avoid it. However, it didn't bother him if Ruggero happened to meet him and came along. When possible though, he preferred to ride through the countryside alone. He would let the horse go at its own pace, reins loose on his neck, while he looked over field after field, crop after crop, visiting the various farms. Sometimes he rode without seeing, just thinking, fantasizing. And he preferred to be alone when he stopped to chat with the people.

His first conquest at Cerreta was the women. Be-

fore him, women had never been taken into consideration. The padroni had passed in their carriages or their automobiles without so much as looking at them; the women had given up waving; they just stood there like morons watching the gentry pass by. But here was this new padrone who stopped, got into conversation with them without arrogance or condescension, asked about the family, how many there were, where they were, how they were doing. He did it to get to know and to understand the thirty or more families, the farmers, woodcutters, and laborers that populated Cerreta. Gherardo felt drawn to the women, with their sense of furtive humility that tempted him like an attractive secret; they naturally returned his affection. "It looks like they're all making love to you," said Corinna. Those slim figures, small, pale, olive-complexioned, with black hair wrapped tightly in yellow or red cloths framing the usually fine and regular features that, without ever being beautiful, responded to his need for harmony. He would meet them at a bend in the road or a fold of the land, always instinctively composed, whether going to the spring to fill water jugs, leading sheep to pasture, standing on the thresholds of their homes, or sitting in the yard spinning. Their colorless clothes appeared chosen to blend with the severity of the scene, like the rough houses with their cracked plaster; a new construction would appear as an offense to the pure wildness of the area. And to hear them speak: that surprise at the good language, the natural choice of words, the precise measured tones.

Mastiani made a point of telling him that if he wanted to make something of the Casanova farm, which ought to be one of the best, with its open slopes and level fields in the bottom of the valley of the Ricausa, it would be necessary to replace the farmer. Casanova, "new house," a surprisingly boastful name for a place where nothing was new, was at the foot of Castiglioni hill and somewhat hidden by a fold in the slope. The hovel of a house, full of cracks because of settlement of the clayey soil, was propped precariously upright. The farmer there was from the mountains of the Maremma, dark and hairy as a boar. Previously a charcoal burner, as his family grew he had turned to farming because it was easier to make a living in the fields than in the woods. Ironically they called him Bello, beautiful, because of his dark brutal face, like a savage animal's, his scarecrow eyes, his cavernous voice. Gherardo had only seen him once, at the farm office; the man's dark, wild look had caught his eye. Mastiani had an exaggerated contempt for him as he had for most of the peasants; but Gherardo felt that if they were lazy, ignorant, it wasn't their fault. He felt he understood them better than Mastiani did; when they talked to him they seemed to be different people. He had an affection even for their defects. When he had tried to make Mastiani see the more human side of their character, their response to the savage nature that surrounded them, Mastiani responded with a tinge of irony. "Agriculture, sir, needs no poetry; it takes brawn and money to put an estate on its feet. At



this rate, not a field would be plowed in all of Tuscany. Here it's beautiful, there it's still more beautiful, but meanwhile we die of hunger."

And there was no denying that he was right. Gherardo began to realize that utility and beauty seldom go hand in hand; sentences like, "It's beautiful because it's useful" sound good to the ear, giving a peaceful illusion of justice and harmony, but confronted with the facts they don't hold up. Perhaps the beauty of Cerreta came in large part from the very deterioration he was trying to check, and when he had put it right he would have to exile himself to some other abandoned place.

Emerging from the heavy scrub of the Poggio al Santo hill above Casanova, the farm's vast, mostly uncultivated fields were beautiful, but it was a sad and desolate beauty; their very misery induced the mind to a grave serenity of contemplation. It was apparent that the farm had seen better times, and that in the hands of those who were now working it the last traces of what little their predecessors had done were being lost. The fields were returning to the wild, being engulfed by the rising tide of scrub. The thorn and bramble hedges that surrounded them to defend them from the animals pastured in the forest were invading the tilled land and were spreading with that vigorous tenacity with which Mother Nature, as soon as one looks away, reaches out to take back from the hand of man what he has so laboriously taken for himself. Of beauty, though, there was a mare that, when she saw

him coming took off in a gallop with her foal full speed behind. She was a well built black, agile of movement, solid in back and shoulders. She passed a good part of the year wandering the pastures and fields until cold and scarcity of fodder brought her suspiciously to the stable. No one had ever mounted her nor trained her to harness, but every year she came in heat and then allowed herself to be taken peacefully to the stallion. She had produced some beautiful foals, and certainly she and her foal, free to romp about in the deep valleys, were among the happiest inhabitants of Cerreta.

At Casanova, in the courtyard, they were threshing the wheat. There were the men of Anterigoli, of Camporedalda, and some from outside come to help. The flails swung high to fall free and fast on the sheaves. The heads broke apart, the kernels popped out, the glittering chaff flew like sparks with the rolling cadence of the flails. In the reverberation the air was vibrant with specks of straw; it seemed of one of those afternoons that could last an eternity.

His visit had not gone well. Bello too was one of the types of the old Sienese painters: square face, dark and gaunt, from a tormented panel of Vecchietta; just as Anna, with her dry grace, was one of those angels of Sasseta that were found alive up here, perhaps just barely; and old Menciatti, Bello's father, with that goat-like beard, was one of those gloomy, worried saints that stand guard over the silent Madonnas of Matteo di Giovanni.

What a difficult man was Bello! To deal with him

was like touching a porcupine. Gherardo opened the stable door; the animals were lying in puddles of yellow-brown liquid; there wasn't a sign of bedding.

"Why this rotten mess?"

Bello looked at the ground without responding.

"Does this seem right to you? The animals in this putrid muck?"

Bello didn't respond. Gherardo felt his blood boiling.

"By tomorrow the stable is to be cleaned and new bedding put in. I'll send the guard to check."

"But we have to thresh the wheat, we're pressed to bring it to the threshing floor; we don't want to get caught in the rain like the other day."

"I'm not discussing it. This can't go on. See that it's done by tomorrow."

"Yessir." A "yessir" that seemed like a "watch out." Gherardo turned in a flash. At that sudden about-face Bello took a step backward. Satisfied that he had made himself perfectly clear, Gherardo entered the house to talk to the housewife.

The poverty of that house seemed dark to him, not for lack of light, but like a look can be dark, more frowning and more hostile than the naked misery of Castiglioni. From the copper pot on the fire came an odor of bean soup; on the black table lay a big goose, plucked, all skin and bones. A woman seated on the bench was plucking another one on her lap. At the foot of her skirt, bundled under its filthy hem, a five-year-old was munching on a greasy piece of bread.

When Gherardo entered the woman looked at him a long moment, without greeting, without moving; then, with a tremor of suspicion in her voice, as if to excuse the abundance of food, said, "I'm getting ready for tonight, for the men who are helping with the threshing." In contact with the pinkish white of the goose, her hands appeared muddy. Even her movements were unnatural, did not have that innate agility of fingers that appear to be caressing an object they touch, nor that wise dexterity when at work, tamed to follow the mind, to signal thoughts by gestures. There had developed on her little bony wrists big ridges and deep folds marked in black, the coarse results of hard work. It seemed that to lift them was difficult, that if they touched something they might break. Even her face was of a heavy texture, the lips without color to distinguish them from the earthy tone of her skin, the wrinkles of her cheeks furrowing high cheekbones, and the round heavy forehead above eye sockets enclosing two small lights that moved behind.

At the sight of her Gherardo was struck with dismay. He stopped several paces away, uncertain; then, seeing those little pig-like eyes dilated in suffering, he brusquely turned and went down the stairs. "I'll come back when I know them a little better; I wouldn't want to do harm through lack of understanding." He doubted that he could make her understand. He felt himself flooded with that bitter and impotent pity that is provoked by sick people with incurable illnesses.

Back at the threshing floor he asked what was the yield of the wheat.

"Look, it's more vetch than wheat" answered Gep-poni of Camporedalda, who had the reputation of being the best farmer of Cerreta, taking a handful from the pile. "Recently the rust has gotten to it; they waited too long to cut it."

Always the usual reason. Delay in reaping and the rust halved the harvest. Too late to sow, too late to harrow, too much time for the weeds to get the upper hand. Laziness, neglect; throw in a little seed and trust in God. In a gloomy mood, without further discussion, he mounted his horse and turned upward toward Castiglioni. What was it in this air that promoted such negligence, even when it came to wheat, which was all they thought of? They feared nothing so much as lacking wheat. A little more work, some good sense and attention, and they could double the crop and avert forever the specter of hunger and hardship, but they didn't take the trouble. What was it that produced men like Bello, creatures like his wife? The privations of generations, surely, that had impoverished the race; the hunger — is it possible that in this day and age one could still talk of hunger? The intermarriage, valley by valley, following the course of the water, never crossing the ridges, distrustful of outsiders. And abandonment, the solitude that promotes unso-ciability and numbs the use of the mind. Never to see people from outside; never to exchange ideas with anyone. But is it the laziness that generates the misery,

or the misery that generates the laziness? The usual vicious circle.

In the feudal days of Cerreta, Montarrenti, Le Palazze, Castiglioni, when the owners lived on their dominions, a fervor for life must have animated these places, organizing the people, perhaps oppressing them. For their part the monasteries — Sant'Ansano, Torri, San Galgano — must have been powerful fulcrums of life, of civility. But then the convents had been closed, abandoned. One must go far back in time to find the origins of the present-day abandonment. Perhaps, after the devastation and destruction of the siege of Siena by the Spanish in 1555, malaria had invaded the plains, the superstitious inhabitants had retired to their walled towns on the hills, the woods had been infested with thieves. With the last grand dukes, competent administrators, there must have been some beginning of rebirth, of which one could still see the traces at Cerreta; it was as if Cerreta could tell its own story, from the thirteenth century ruins of Castiglioni to the not-yet-century-old works against which the savage forces of nature were now raging. The laziness, the shortsightedness, the lack of tools, must have been obstacles. And that natural slowness of the apparently hostile land, that interminable trail of consequences that every act seems to generate through time, like waves of sound that continue to infinity, like concentric rings in still water at the fall of a pebble. The principal cause, certainly, was abandonment by owners who went to live in the city and didn't think of the

land except as a source of revenue, then milked it until it ran dry. Those were the true culprits. No wonder that even the peasants no longer wanted to stay.

Halfway up the slope he turned toward the valley. The roofs of Casanova had disappeared under the hill; in the soft afternoon light he could see nothing but forest. The buildings of Cerreta were hidden by the shoulder of Poggio al Santo, nothing visible but scrub. That scrub, which seemed to hold the secret of so much decay, began to strike fear into him.

Without noticing, wrapped in these thoughts, he had arrived at the river. The clear waters ran noiselessly between the white poplars. There he got down from the saddle, took off his boots and, holding the horse by the reins, crossed in bare feet, uncertain on the wobbly rocks, ready to catch himself if he slipped. The coolness that invaded his limbs seemed to wash away the impatience, the discouragement. He really needed to learn to enjoy the beauty of the moment, without allowing himself to suffer from that fever for a tomorrow that perhaps would make him look back on today with nostalgia.

In the middle of the river the water was knee deep; hampered as he was with the reins and boots, he had to bend over to roll up his pants. The mare, enjoying the splashing coolness of the water, started to bend her legs forward to throw herself in, to wallow with her sweaty and muddy body. He had to prod her to keep her moving across

A little beyond, at the top of the hill, Castiglioni

appeared. The level bottom of the valley opened below, alternating squares of green meadow and dried areas of harvested grain, besieged by thick brush that encroached from the lower slopes of the hills. Gherardo stopped on the first hilltop to look down the valley. He was considering plowing the entire bottom, uniting the cultivated acres scattered here and there amid the untilled land bristly with junipers, which must once have been fields. He wanted all the flat and gently rolling land at the bottom of the valley to become an extended area of fields and meadows, open without trees, from below Castiglioni, where the Riccausa flows into the Merse, past the abandoned mill, on up by Casanova and Anterigoli even as far as Montecchio and Le Palazze. It seemed to him that it would be easy to create a hundred hectares of land cultivable by machine, the best bottomland of Cerreta.

And he saw that the green plain would in no way reduce the majesty of the hills and the forests. Treeless, vast, open, it would give breathing space to the valley. He grew excited at the prospect; it was one of those happy moments in which difficulties disappear and results appear already achieved. With loving intensity he was putting his ownership to the test of executing his plans. It was a high duty imposed directly by God, to redeem the land; he had been chosen. And how, if not by God's will, could he be invested with that power? And how to earn it except by work? The goal could not be achieved except by continual obedience to his duty: providing, organizing, supervising.

From the dark hills the evening fell into the valleys. There arose a song, up from Casanova. Gherardo turned his horse. Entering the narrow defiles, he felt himself near to that God who had made him padrone, and asked God to make him understand the laws, His laws and no laws except His, to understand what he really owed to the people and to the earth, but more to the earth than to the men, since the earth must remain to nourish the sons of the sons. With an ironic and compassionate return to himself, he told himself that he needn't worry about nature; she would take care of herself through the usual means, by subduing all creatures to her purposes, as through beauty and love she ensures the continuity of the species, just as with a mirage of freedom she had attracted him to Cerreta, to better capture him in those chains that now, even if he could, he wouldn't want to break. The feeling of being master hadn't lasted long; he was now a slave, in a desired and voluptuous slavery.

At Castiglioni that evening, the two women stayed outside longer than usual. A mother-of-pearl mist lay in the deep valley; from hidden Casanova rose the songs of well-fed men. The voices were stripped of every human sense and became part of the night, like the song of an owl, like the vast chirping of the crickets that punctuated the deep breathing of the hills.

They didn't have dinner that evening; they nibbled some leftover bread, without lighting a fire, before closing out the night and going to bed.

The songs and voices neared.

"It's the men returning to Brenna, after the threshing" said Teresa to relieve her anxiety. In the dark room the two women were holding their breath. The voices stopped; they relaxed. Then they heard the men nearby; they must have been under the arch, in the courtyard. Now they knocked on the corrugated metal that formed their door. Then they were silent, listening. Then voices began again, obscene, laughing, drunken. In the dark the women got up, piled the table and the bed against the tin and loose boards of the door. Now they began to knock louder and to shout, "Teresa, don't be afraid, we don't want to do you any harm, rather we love you too well. There's a moon out that would turn your head. Come on out, Teresa." Then, after a silence someone said, "Worse for you if you want us to use force."

In silence the old woman took down the hatchet and gave the pruning hook to Teresa. Now they were speaking in low voices outside. But then there was a great blow of shoulders together that broke through some of their barrier; one more blow would knock it all down. The old woman jumped into the doorway brandishing the hatchet. "Watch out what you're doing; if anyone enters, I'll put him under the ground."

She remained with the hatchet raised, right in the doorway. Outside, total silence. Then someone said:

"I've got a family, boys."

"Coward, he's scared of two women." It was the voice of Bello.

"If you want to stay, ok; but I don't want anything

to do with the Carabinieri.”

“He’s scared of two women!”

“Wait,” said another voice, “we have to go together.”

“If you want to come,” the voice was already distant, “hurry it up.”

Footsteps moved away on the cobbled surface of the court. Bello began whining again, “Come on, Teresa, open up for me. You know me; I’m Bello of Casanova. I’ll just sleep in a corner, on the ground.” Then he tried furiously to push against the sheet metal, for a long time, until, losing his footing, they heard him fall with a heavy thud, then moan, first in anger, then whimpering like a dog on a chain who can’t resign himself to his fate.

Finally there was the silence of the forest, so full of sound for one who is awake waiting for the dawn. When at daybreak they left to go to work, they had to detour to avoid him, supine as a corpse, as they slipped silently away.

VI

Now Bello began waiting for her along the pathways. He had an awkward yet at the same time menacing way of laughing and winking at her that made Teresa feel she was dealing with a lunatic. Shivering, she would hurry by, but Bello would match steps with her. She tried to shake him but he would follow, always talking, endlessly talking. He said his wife was less use than the animals, that though only thirty-five she looked fifty. One day when Teresa threatened to call the guard he had answered, "Ah, you've got something going with Pasquale?" that was his way: both stupid and malicious.

And the new padrone? It seemed that they had been forgotten among the day-to-day events; nothing had changed. They had put aside without resentment the hopes that had been aroused by his visit. They knew that it would be difficult to help them: Castiglioni was distant, out of sight, out of mind. For work they were waiting from day to day for the call to go to reap grain in the plains of Stigliano, where there was a shortage of manpower at harvest time. Meanwhile they enlarged the garden at the spring, hoeing beans, potatoes, corn, in those handkerchief-sized squares

that they had planted.

One day when Teresa was watching the goat in the chestnut grove of Riovivo, she dozed against a tree trunk, groggy from the heat, dreaming of her childhood in Brenna, when they would hide and imagine themselves living in storybook times. Suddenly with the shock of two heavy hands on her shoulders she woke with heavy breathing in her face. She started to scream; but the forest in its infinite calm was as quiet as on a moonlit night. Then summoning all her strength, with a jerk that caught the less agile man by surprise, she slipped out from under and took off on a run out of danger. She heard him recover, but she knew she was faster; feeling herself temporarily safe, she kept on down the path to Casanova.

From the threshing floor Bello's wife looked at her with the half-witted stupor of one who has trouble thinking. Teresa shouted, "Your man, your man!" While the confused woman simply stared Teresa climbed the stairs, entered the bedroom, closed the door. When Bello, arriving at the door, started to laugh scornfully, "You're trapped, I'll get you when I'm ready," she made up her mind: from the window she jumped onto the roof of the hayloft, from there to the ground, and then ran for the woods.

From that day on she carried a machete in her belt, like the woodcutters.

On the plain of Rosia they were harvesting the wheat. As soon as day broke Teresa would climb the mountain behind Castiglioni and drop down into the

valley. Those who lived closer would already be at work. There was a pleasure and freshness, with her scythe in line with the others as they bit through the hard stems, making their way through the grain with the rhythmic movement, always the same, repeated endlessly. The fields in the plain were immense, beautiful; for the harvesters in the middle, submerged in a sea of grain, they spread without limit to the horizon. Everywhere they were cutting; on the knolls still moist with fog one could see the row of men, small, far away, and the line of the cut advanced like a great snake along the slopes.

When they began to feel the heat they would have breakfast in the shade, alongside the field, or at the edge of a stream under a line of poplars. They ate their bread in silence; then the old ones lit their pipes, the young ones cigarettes. Then one by one they would take up their scythes and go back to the field. The high sun blinded the pink expanse of the fields; the air was hot; in the burning heat the hills faded. If when resting one glanced up at the sky, one could see everywhere a dazzling mirage of spikes of grain. Little by little, with the heat, limbs loosened, sweat poured freely, all the body was taken by a mild fever, pleasant. These were the good hours when the work was enjoyable. At noon groups got together — families, neighbors, friends — for lunch. Some had bread and cheese, some bread and ham, some a ricotta, some an onion. Wine was passed; flasks came and went between the groups; with a feeling of well-being, salacious and vul-

gar jokes ran among the boys and some of the faster girls, moving in a chain of laughter along the lines. Teresa stayed by herself; these were not people from her parts. Then, wherever they could find a bit of shade, the men put their jackets under their heads, the women their rolled smocks, and slept, a deep, lethargic, sleep.

One day when she awoke she could extract no more effort from her aching bones. Her head was reeling with a drunkenness of the sun reflected on the grain; she kept stumbling, falling every so often into a furrow. Then, after a rest, her limbs loosened and began to behave and follow her movements. She staggered, but went on as if being pushed, anxious to arrive at the ditch bordering the field, as if afterward she wouldn't have to begin again, in the next field. Anguish swept over her, drunk from the sun, the sun on the wheat. sometimes at the end of a row, one of the men would turn her around.

On and on they advanced, the men drinking occasionally from their wicker-covered flasks; toward evening they sang. As she squatted to tie the sheaves she could see them trying to look up her dress. With the fatigue that she was suffering, an even greater bitterness involuntarily caused her knees to clench tightly together.

One evening a storm gathered over the forest. It had already passed over the ridge to the stones of Siena Vecchia. As far as the hill of Castiglioni where the tower looked down into the valley there was

nothing but black. She watched helplessly as it gathered on the mountains and came on fast, violent.

The ridge divided the sky into two zones. On this side, in the valley of the Rosia, the air was calm but the blue sky was about to lose its last frayed white clouds, torn by sudden flashes and long rumbles of thunder. Over there brief gusts of wind, in blasts without warning, raged against the chestnuts as if to uproot them. Without knowing how, she found herself in the middle of the tumult, leaning against a tree. She was so tired that she couldn't resist sleep; her eyes closed. Meanwhile it was getting dark; the blackness of the sky lowered to the tops of the trees. During a respite she tried to run, but a gust came out of the valley, staggered her. In a ghostly flash she heard behind her a crash, a sudden crackling, an immense rending. She turned; the chestnut against which she had been leaning had split in two and the entire tree had collapsed, like a landslide. She made the sign of the cross and ran away through the dark. At the ilex grove of Castiglioni it began to rain hard; the storm exhausted itself in a huge downpour that fell in great warm drops, filling the forest with a deep low monotone. Finally at home she fell into bed shivering, soaked to the marrow. In the night, during her sleep, her mother could hear her teeth chattering. In the morning, with the pain tormenting her bones, she couldn't get up. The old woman went to the Fattoria for the guard Pasquale, who immediately saddled up to go to Pian di Feccia, ten miles away, to call the doctor.

The doctor was in the pharmacy, in the room in back, playing cards with the pharmacist, Don Vanzetti, and the *brigadiere*, head of the local police, the Carabinieri. Pian di Feccia, the center of the most important estate in those parts, serves as headquarters for essential public services for tens of square kilometers of territory. At the mention of Castiglioni, the doctor raised his eyes from the cards, glanced at the window. The steadily falling rain looked like it would continue for some time.

"To Castiglioni? Are you crazy? To catch pneumonia and head for the afterworld?" When he had finished the hand he collected his cards for shuffling, and asked, "But who is there at Castiglioni? Isn't it uninhabited? Who sent you, the new padrone?"

"There are these two women from Brenna, living as best they can. They were evicted, and had nowhere to go."

"And now what's the problem?"

"A terrible fever."

"All talk! A fever never killed anyone. Is she in pain?"

Pasquale shrugged. The doctor, giving another look at the weather, said, "Saddle my horse. If we wait for the weather to get better it's liable to get worse just for spite."

He wrapped up in a great muddy-colored coat and stopped at the bar for a quick drink. "You have one too, Pasquale; you're liable to catch something in this weather." He hoisted himself with difficulty onto his

horse; the animal, since he was a heavy man, sagged with habitual resignation under his weight. He lit a cigar that a moment later went out, and continued to chew on it all the way. In silence they took the short cut that, crossing the hills of Montorsaio, fell into the valley of the Ricausa in front of Castiglioni. The forest was loud with the rain on the leaves and with the torrents that cascaded down the paths.

At Castiglioni, dismounting, he muttered between his teeth, "Disturbing a doctor in this weather for a fever. Ah, dear God, what a business!" He had them light a good fire in the stove. Soon, as the steam rose from his half-soaked clothes he calmed down, partly because of the comfort of being dry, partly because that was his way: unless he found the patient already dead or practically so, he would vent curses on his profession in these places where for every call there were eight or ten miles to travel. When he was younger he had left his country medical practice to go to the city, but he had found himself like a fish out of water, gasping for air. After a few months he had asked for his old practice back, a request easily granted; candidates for such lonely posts were rarely found.

"People shouldn't be permitted to live like this, in caves like in the Stone Age. If this continues, Pasquale, no one will be left in these parts; it will all return to forest, as in the time of the brigands that you and I remember well. And meanwhile in the city they spend millions to build monuments and palaces! What is the new padrone doing at Cerreta?" In the mean-

time he had taken Teresa's temperature. Finding it high he asked for a glass of water so that he could give her a dose of quinine.

"For now, understand, the first need is to get things organized. His intentions are good."

"And in all Cerreta isn't there a hole to put these women in?"

"Everywhere it's the same. As long as I've been there I've never seen anyone touch a brick at Cerreta. Everything's falling to pieces."

"But how's he set for money? Because it will take a lot, and then a lot more". To see how the people lived bothered him, perhaps from a sense of remorse, but more from impotence, the impotence of not being able to see how things could be improved. And yet, someone must be at fault: the upper classes, the government?

"It's not going very well at Pian di Feccia either. Since the death of the poor old Marquis it's another world. There's no telling how it will come out if the heirs don't find a way to come to an agreement; in the meantime the lawyers will eat it all. Right now nothing is being done, nothing can be spent, and everything gets worse. Poor Marquis Ippolito, if he could see how his work has ended up. If things go on this way a little longer we'll be back with the malaria, like thirty years ago. You, Pasquale, wouldn't remember, but then the plain of the Feccia, at the first rains, became a swamp. From the castle as far as San Galgano there wasn't a house. The people were in the towns, or up in the

hills. And then he arrived, I still remember as if it were yesterday, half crazy he seemed, always with a joke; and what energy!"

"When they started to build the first houses under the Morto, the people shrugged: 'Rich man's folly!' If he hadn't had a hard head, nothing would have gotten done. Rain or shine or wind, every morning on foot with the workers, digging, draining ditches, clearing brush. Christ knows how he did it. He was everywhere at once. And with whoever didn't do his job he didn't mince any words. They appreciate it now, those who used to complain; now that they're out looking for work they remember. Forty farms were made, from one swamp, understand, Pasquale. And he could have lived *la dolce vita*, in Rome, travelling, enjoying. He could have spent his time better." He had lit his cigar on the stove, but though he puffed and puffed, the doctor couldn't manage to get a mouthful of smoke. "But then, that was how he amused himself."

Teresa had a fit of coughing. Then he sat her up, listened to the lungs. A cold or pneumonia? There's little difference. What pleasure could they find in this life? And yet, it is easier for these unfortunates to escape.

A ray of sun penetrated the grotto. The doctor went outside.

The rain had stopped. The clouds were breaking up, revealing big areas of blue sky into which they mysteriously disappeared. From under the arch the valley appeared reborn, beautiful, all the vegetation

perfumed in enjoyment of the moisture that penetrated leaves, trunks, roots.

"Only Montorsaiò is in good shape. With that calm manner of his, Count Geminiani appears to do nothing, yet everything is in order. You know, you don't need to hurry with the earth. I've learned that by now. There's his young nephew, a beautiful boy, but not very well, they're always at my house with the gig, to get me. He's all they have; that boy will inherit all the patrimony of Geminiani. He's the last of the name." He was quiet for a moment, as if reflecting, pulling on his spent cigar. "But here we're in the middle ages."

"You're right, doctor. There are five farms empty at Cerreta. And how can they be filled? There are no animals, the houses are falling to pieces. We'll soon see. There's a new manager, full of knowledge. He talks a good line; we'll see how he does. The padrone appears to be a good man. There's been a lot of misfortune; for many people."

The doctor went back in, again took Teresa's pulse and held her wrist between his hands. "Don't worry; take care of yourself. Don't go back to work until you feel strong. And if this doesn't pass, have them call me." And as if answering Teresa's dubious look, "I know that once the harvest is over, there'll be no work. I also know that you need the work; but if you ruin your health, what then?"

He took up his coat, which smelled of burnt wool, and, still chatting with Pasquale, tied it to his saddle-bow. "People who don't see these conditions with

their own eyes wouldn't believe them. But if there weren't padroni it would be worse. When I was young I thought otherwise. In the city it 's different. But up here . . the land needs to see its man face to face, both padrone and peasant. Better a good-for-little padrone than no padrone at all. At Cerreta you already know that; you've had the Corporation. And let's be honest, even the padroni have their problems. The land returns what it's given, and what it gives it wants back. Not everyone can manage an estate up here. I don't mean in Tuscany; down there things are easier." Among themselves they referred to Tuscany as the land down below, beyond the dam on the Rosia, along the valley of the Elsa, over to Siena and up to Firenze. Anything outside that, including these hills, was considered the Maremma.

He mounted his horse with a "Well, let's hope." Then, sniffing the clear sharp air like a dog freed from the leash, with muzzle in the wind deciding which way to go, he disappeared down into the shining ilex.

VII

When Pasquale told him that Teresa had been ill, Gherardo felt a resurgence of his customary remorse. Was it possible that he had forgotten those unfortunates so soon, when they depended on him for relief? He went down to Castiglioni immediately. Teresa was up and working around the house; she and her mother received him with the same soft submissive attentiveness as last time, but their resignation, their asking nothing, was the sharpest reproach they could have given him.

On his return, before entering the villa, he stopped in the office and to an appalled Mastiani said all at once: "First thing next week, without awaiting further orders, the masons will go to Sant'Ansano. Next to the Boccinis there are three abandoned old rooms that can be made habitable without much difficulty. I want those women of Castiglioni to move there; they're too much on my conscience. You're right, Castiglioni is too far away." Mastiani, shocked at this unaccustomed imperious manner, was momentarily speechless. Gherardo left hurriedly, giving him no time to rattle off the litany of objections that would doubtless be reasonable and could cause him to hesitate, those blessed hesita-

tions that Mastiani knew how to take advantage of for his purposes. Good purposes, no doubt, but this time Gherardo had made up his mind.

All right then, that's what would be done. Orders were orders, and no knew better than Mastiani how to respect them; but no complaints if the work went slowly, and if their other projects suffered a slowdown.

In the past, from what the old folks said and from what could be seen of ancient traces of cultivation, the cultivated area of Cerreta had been divided into twenty or twenty-five farms. Now there were eight, and two smaller fields. Gherardo had started with the self-confident intention of putting ten per year into operation. Later he had reduced this to five, those for which the buildings were most easily adaptable as farmhouses, leaving the others for later. The buildings that had once been farmhouses now housed woodcutters and laborers, who paid just a few lira rent per year.

After the restoration of Sant'Ansano for Teresa and her mother, the masons would go on to Casetta, four miserable rooms housing the family of a laborer named Brocchi, in the center of a vast uncultivated area that with a little work could become a farm again. From there they would go on to Causa, the biggest group of buildings on the estate. By better organizing the various families that lived there, and the large ramshackle buildings that must once have been stables and storehouses, a pair of farmsteads could be developed. Near the castle of Cerreta the big upland farm should be split in two, as should Le Palazze, which as the name

implied were originally two farms.

This, as Mastiani said, was "the minimum program," but to accomplish it would be no small job. In addition to repairing the already inhabited farmhouses, the land had to be reclaimed. The degradation of a farm, once started, propagated like a contagious disease, like weeds. Time was, when a farm became empty, the fields would have been divided among the adjacent farms, but nowadays the farm families lacked the manpower to cultivate their own. Thus open fields became pastures, untilled. Vineyards and olives fared worse: through lack of cultivation and fertilization, and exposure to disease, the plants filled with dead branches and rot, returning to the wild. The olives became thick with suckers at the base and water sprouts along the trunk, producing much vegetation but little fruit. In the poorest soil they grew covered with scab; the trunks became thin, one branch drying out, then another, until nothing remained but a bush of sprouts at the foot of a dried-up trunk. Long shoots from the grapevines ran through the brush next to the fields and climbed like clematis into the trees of the forest. Looking carefully, one could find where there had once been a row; but little by little the forest, exuberant, greedy to take back the land, had swallowed it up.

Corinna did not participate in Gherardo's enthusiasms, which so often were followed by despair. A great serenity was being born in her, as a counterpoise to his agitated state. Her urge to rebel against the forces that somehow used to take control of her will and shape it

to their rhythms had passed. Less and less did nostalgia for the past return, and without regret, but rather with a strange hurry to get free of that past life, she turned more and more to the present and to the future. Nor did she mind being left alone; the ample lazy hours in the rooms, the slow walks around the villa were enough for her. She didn't mind being bored, learned the love of space and time, enjoyed them as a bath in liquid or in light. The innocence of those solitary hours seemed necessary to her development, like the winter lethargy of the larva. She enjoyed feeling herself alone, with the vague shadow of Gherardo in some corner of herself, more so than having him present with his worries. A strange intensity of subterranean life currents animated the slow succession of the days. In a certain sense, without being able to explain it, she felt herself living deeply, while her busy previous life took on an aspect of emptiness.

To break the sequence of that life of intertwined monotony and intensity there were visits to the neighbors, an unavoidable social duty. Although they grumbled privately at these invasions of their beautiful peace, at heart they took a curious interest, something more than the tired curiosity of the conscientious neighbor, perhaps because neighbors were so few and so far apart. Every one of them represented a vast extension of land and of interests; the workers and peasants talked about them often. They were all connected in important ways to each other, to the places, to the land.

For example, while planning a visit to Montorsaio they learned of the lives and deaths and miracles of the Geminiani. "Great fine people, at Montorsaio," Ruggero had said when Gherardo mentioned them. "You'll see that you and the count will become close friends." Long before their first visit, the men of Cerreta had briefed them in detail on the history and people of Montorsaio, to the point that they felt that they knew them perfectly. In places where distractions are few, people observe carefully and deduce subtle and precise conclusions.

The Tenuta di Montorsaio, from time immemorial the fief and possession of the Counts Geminiani, borders Cerreta for several miles along its southern side, penetrating here and there into the main body of the estate, or in turn letting itself be invaded according to the caprice of the water courses and the ridges, and sometimes without any apparent reason, as if the border had been plotted at random on a map. There was even a field of Cerreta inserted inside the land of Montorsaio, like an island.

When still young Count Geminiani had been widowed, with two daughters. He had kept them secluded up there with him, taught by governesses and tutors, until they had reached the age to see a bit of the world. Then he had sent them to live with their aunts in Rome, with visits to Montorsaio for several months in the summer. He had not received much satisfaction from the girls; it was as if they were not his own, they were so different. He was vaguely aware of their de-

fects without being especially bothered by them; perhaps the lonely life that he preferred had given his spirit a certain detachment and a broad tolerance of human shortcomings, even with those close to him. He had tried to be a good father, insofar as the character of the children had permitted, but it took a lot out of him, especially after they were married, when he couldn't stand the in-laws. However, he loved his grandson Sandro, only son of the oldest daughter, and his only heir. The joys that he had not had from his own children he was at last finding now, fruits from the flowers of his own adolescence. It was better this way: pleasures that came to him at an age when other satisfactions of life were lacking. Not that he could be called old; at fifty-nine he looked no older than forty-five.

Sandro appeared to have adopted his grandfather's character, skipping a generation. He was tall and slim, nervous like the count, and had that precious gift of arousing sympathy that mother nature, illogical and unjust like all women, passes out in such unequal measure; a mere courteous word from one of these privileged ones is received with more appreciation than a generous action by others. Rarely does this gift go in parallel with any special merit; it seems rather to go together with certain faculties that perhaps, through our own hypocrisy, we usually consider negligible, instinctive qualities that correspond to artistic gifts: a beautiful smile, graceful movements that the eyes cannot help but follow, sympathetic interest, the

warm coloration of the voice that changes words into caresses. One tends to imagine that these charming qualities are the surface manifestations of some inner state of mind, but then one sees that on the contrary, they live on their own. They don't correspond to any particular quality of the spirit, but are qualities in their own right, complete in themselves. Perhaps they obey laws of deep harmony like those that nature shows in certain moments of abandon, springing from certain essential sources from which you can't ask anything else, just as nature, an end in itself, contains no symbols nor feelings. But our perceptions pervert these charms in our wish to apply to the most innocent things our human concepts of cause and effect, so that it is no longer possible to simply enjoy, without having to justify our pleasure.

Count Geminiani loved his nephew with a maternal, almost feminine tenderness which he hid by the friendly roughness with which he treated him, almost without showing his affection. Corinna quickly sensed the warmth of that hidden weakness evidenced in the voice and gestures of Count Geminiani, in total contrast to his open and jovial manner. Even she, as soon as she met the boy, felt an urge to put her hand on his shoulder, and when in the heat of conversation she would happen to please him, it was like receiving a small but fine favor from nature, reserved for her, like finding in the forest an off-season cyclamen in blossom. The boy reacted to the tribute of affection that surrounded him simply by radiating a natural grace.

It was through their delight in the nephew that they gained the friendship of Count Geminiani, who was not always so neighborly, and this had its importance, since he was considered more or less the head of the region, especially since the loss of his lamented friend and neighbor Marquis Ippolito of Pian di Fecchia. He appreciated this consideration, but didn't want offices or honors; he preferred to preserve his freedom. When among padroni and peasants there arose those contentious cases that are not contemplated by law or by custom, people came to Montorsaio to ask what to do. And even when they were not at first convinced, they ended by conforming to his decisions.

Gherardo leaned on him with the respect of the neophyte for the master, anxious to believe in him, to admire him, to learn how one could become a master of the agricultural arts which every day were revealing more of their contradictory difficulties. He had learned by now that he couldn't rely on the rules in the books that he read with such zeal; they were always either too vague to be useful, or too precise to be applicable to his case. What also bewildered him was the casual way in which Mastiani passed from one theory to another, defending today with drawn sword a system only to exalt the opposite tomorrow. Could one in agriculture, as in philosophy, play with ideas, supporting at the same time the most diverse doctrines, even combining them for pure dialectic enjoyment? It is certain that if an experiment fails one can always blame the circumstances that never perfectly fit the

theory; to achieve those results that the books seemed to promise to the credulous imagination of the cultivator one would need to isolate all the variables of time, place, and season in a hypothetical glassed-in laboratory.

In reaction, he had passed from the books to the most elementary practices, ingesting wisdom from the lips of the peasants, from those on the estate who had theories developed from practice, but even there he lost his way; their rules were subject to no principle; they varied mysteriously for obscure reasons, often superstitions. Sometimes they were valid, rooted perhaps in unconscious experience transmitted from generation to generation and by now become instinctive.

Mastiani shrugged his shoulders: "Ignorance!"

Perhaps Count Geminiani could have clarified for him the mysteries of the peasant theories. Though he would never admit it, he had a deep understanding and sympathy for peasant wisdom, though he preferred to associate only with the upper classes.

This particular day at Montorsaio the Michelins were also there, the proprietors of Marmoraia, the estate that penetrated from Montarrenti into the Siennese Montagnola and owed its name to the richness of its quarry of yellow Siena marble that was every day becoming more rare and more valuable. Signor Micheli had made a first impression on Gherardo of the type that one reaches immediately and with certainty, only to find that on further acquaintance the impression is completely reversed. He was an imposing figure of a

man with a booming voice, ways so innocently brusque and broad that the rooms of those old villas, no matter how vast, appeared inadequate. To Gherardo he at first seemed the model of the country gentleman, gruff but easy-going, the natural product of ancient rural tradition and the conditions of life in those parts. Filling the spaces that he didn't yet know of his character, he imagined him with a certain picturesque gusto, big eater and drinker, predator on rural virtue, illiterate or nearly so, lover of tricks and lively stories, superficially judgmental of underlings, but ready to close one eye or maybe both to their peccadilloes. But it turned out that he could not be accurately judged by these appearances; in fact he was a raw and inexperienced newcomer to the landed gentry.

Micheli's father, a notorious moneylender, had succeeded so well in wrapping the previous proprietor of Marmoraia in his net that he had sucked in the estate almost without pain to the owner, with an unfelt and sure slowness, as the serpent assimilates its prey. The owner, Gordigiani-Bardini, with no heirs and feeling no impact on his way of life, continued to do what he had done every day for perhaps fifty years in these parts; on his schedule, to the minute, one could see the lively old man, always in good health, go from the villa, where he had been reduced to the third floor, to the Circolo degli Uniti, his local gentlemen's club, and then later from the Circolo back to the villa.

The foreclosure sale of Marmoraia had taken place some twenty years before, and nowadays few remem-

bered it or held it against the Michelis, but among those who certainly would have was Count Geminiani, had it not been for Micheli's wife, for whose sake he tolerated her husband. The count liked Signora Flavia, in contrast to her husband, very much. Originally from Venice, she had not lost the cadence of her accent despite many years passed amid the purity of the local language, and it was pleasing to hear, like the cadence of a merry dance number in the middle of a classic opera.

One wondered how they had chosen each other, those two, so completely different. Perhaps it was one of those marriages arranged by priests or old maids or matchmakers that still happen nowadays, however incredible it may seem, among the more conservative of the middle class, more protective than ever of their interests. Perhaps at twenty-five, before his physique was marked so decidedly by his inner being, Micheli could have been a good-looking man of the Carabinieri type. How Signora Flavia, after ten years of being jealously shut up in that cold villa among the ilex of the Montagnola, was still able to burst into that clear laugh at which her husband looked askance, was one of those phenomena that serve to prove the incredible adaptability of the human animal to less than favorable circumstances. And those visits to Montorsaio — Micheli would submit to any authority to maintain the friendship of the count — were one of the few safety valves for Signora Flavia, given her vitality that in other circumstances could have been dangerous, had

this bit of freedom not soothed her.

In a good mood, walking between her and Corinna, Count Geminiani guided them in a visit to the shops of his *fattoria* farm center. Sandro was nearby, a bit behind, silent and content like a dog beside the hunter. Following them were the Geminiani sisters, with Gherardo and the Michelis. Gherardo got no help in his quest for agricultural knowledge from Micheli, whose knowledge of the subject consisted in being gruff with the peasants, in supervising the division of the crops with a thorough rigor and an arrogant and menacing severity, and above all in a naïve and unproductive suspicion of everyone and everything. No one else could have borne being surrounded by people who he saw as thieves ready to profit from him every time he turned his back; Micheli fattened on it. Who really directed the agricultural business of the estate was his father, still vigorous despite his age. More than anything, the elder Micheli had bought the property to raise the status of the family. He was sure that with time, when his son had hosted good hunts and offered good dinners, people would not look too carefully at the origins of the money with which they were entertained, money that very likely came from the pockets of their fathers and was in a certain sense a restitution

But he was mistaken; his son was born narrow-minded and stingy. For the old usurer who had wanted to make him a signore, who had hoped to see him squander, within reason, the money for which he had

sweat blood, there remained no other satisfaction but to improve Marmoraia, quarry, villa, and estate, no longer for the son, but for a sterile ambition that made him reflect with a sense of mute impotence on the vanity of human conquests, and in particular the conquest of money. And though on Saturdays he always went to market in Siena with his lunch in his pocket to avoid the cost of restaurants, when it was a matter of enriching the facilities of the estate he didn't spare expense.

In Count Geminiani's stables the first thing that struck the eye was the glorification of the local breeds. At Cerreta, Mastiani never missed a chance to criticize them, discoursing on the more rapid growth of other breeds and the greater profits in raising them. Certainly, a visit to Cerreta's stables could not prove him wrong; but here the effect was entirely different. Here were only local Maremma oxen, with great moon-shaped horns, great almost black shoulders, low powerful bodies, short and agile legs, with something of the savage in their eyes. And in the stys, pigs of the Cinta breed, the same that can be seen in the countryside of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco of the Good Government. The stables were beautiful, airy, clean, too well kept in Gherardo's opinion; they seemed more a luxury than part of an agricultural operation; in this he had learned to expect more stinginess than splendor.

Perhaps out of vanity in his newly acquired knowledge, he surprised himself by repeating some phrases

of Mastiani referring to specialized imported breeds. "Wife and ox from your own neighborhood," moralized Geminiani. "Up here we need rustic animals, for several reasons. But you need to experiment or else you don't learn. They have many advantages, these animals; you'll see." In saying so he caressed the neck of a filly that had turned its muzzle toward him as he passed. "Unfortunately, our native breeds are disappearing; there has been too much cross-breeding. But now we are attempting to go back to the old."

In the stable they stopped at a tall carriage of antique but still impressive form. "My grandfather went to Siena in this every Saturday. He was a scatter-brain, and not without a bit of arrogance, but he was an original. One evening, at Braccio, between Cerreta and Montorsaio, some brigands stopped them. They asked for a thousand lira. My grandfather gave the reins to the coachman, stood erect on the coach: "A noble count of the Geminiani of Montorsaio, a thousand lira?" and signed over a check for five thousand, to be cashed in the office at the farm. And the beauty was that it was paid without discussion, as a debt of honor. Those thieves never gave him any more trouble."

The count's daughters had not been quite so cordial; perhaps Corinna's attractiveness had aroused in them that rancor natural to many women not so favored by nature. They had no sooner heard of the sale of Cerreta than they had gone to work to learn who the new neighbors were. From Rome they had gotten the not-too-well-intentioned information they wanted

about Corinna. Not that there was anything bad; she had been a modern girl, of a type of which there are many nowadays, one of those who don't pay much attention to the opinions of others.

The elder of the sisters, Pia, had inherited her father's thin physique and caustic wit, but not his compensating amiable defects and generosity of heart. She had a grand conception of the nobility of the family name, like that of the Tolomeis or the Pannocchieschis that one ran into at every turn in the newspapers of Siena or the Maremma. As a girl she had said it would be difficult for her to marry, because in Tuscany there were only two or three boys of a status worthy of her. One summer she took under her protection a foreman named Tozzi, little more than a boy just out of agricultural school, and married him. Perhaps convinced that she had chosen what was good for her, her father let her do it. Now Pia called herself Countess Tozzi-Geminiani, and as the mother of Sandro, the heir of the house, started butting with spiteful diligence into the affairs of the father, which irritated him no end, especially when on the occasion of some prodigality she called him to account. To get his son-in-law, who had immediately taken on the suave manners of a parasite on the lord's estate, out from underfoot, he had given him the administration of Pietrafitta, a farm estate he owned in the upper Chianti, where the wine was good but the living hard.

In Signora Micheli's way of staying close beside him Gherardo felt a naïve desire to please and to be

pleased that was difficult to resist. He let himself be won over with a feeling of well-being. She looked at him with trusting and smiling eyes; he felt that she enjoyed being with him and wanted him to know it. Passing through the gates of the Fattoria they found themselves overwhelmed by the plain of the Feccia, a beautiful area, vast, fresh, green. For the first time Gherardo experienced the physical sensation of the mountainous knot that the hills of Cerreta formed behind him, between the two plains. It gave him a sense of isolation, of being closed in. In the mild light of late afternoon the horizon opened all the way to the peaks of Gerfalco and the mountains of Montieri. Farther on, several little villages clung to the tops of the hills, spilling long lines of houses that seemed to slide down the slopes.

While they were heading back to the house a beautiful lustrous black horse gave a neigh at their approach and began to trot in circles among the few trunks of the paddock, with head high and tail straight as if to emphasize its beauty. In every action of the nervous legs, in its agile and superb carriage, in its solid and quick form, it showed such a perfect harmony that one could not take ones eyes off it. "That's Ali, the stallion, an arab. A beauty," said the younger daughter of the Count, Nerina, who up to then had not opened her mouth.

She was a strange type of spinster: more man than woman, she appeared to have taken on the masculine spirit that Count Geminiani had so wanted in a son.

She was tall and heavy, massively boned but not fat; the big bones of this gawky woman would never soften into feminine curves. A great walker and indomitable horsewoman, when the horses felt themselves gripped by those legs they must have said resignedly, "Today will be rough," a feeling they shared with the people of the farm, since she roughly handled men and beasts without regard. But it must be added that she had no pity on herself either.

They had entered the corral. Taking from her pocket a handful of oats, she stroked with evident pleasure the anxious neck of the beautiful animal, calm but always suspicious, always ready to shy away, and doing this she became almost beautiful, as do all who do what is truly in their nature.

VIII

Down in the valley between Montecchio and Camporedalda flow the springs of the Vene. The upwelling waters collect in a clear pool; in the evenings the peasants of the two farms come there to water their livestock. Around the pond, the trampling of the animals has created an open space where nothing grows but some low weeds. A high clump of white poplars lifts its silver trunks and tremulous leaves, the color of stagnant waters, above the dark density of the surrounding thicket. Then the stream trickles in a grassy rivulet toward the Ricausa, beneath the last slopes of Camporedalda hill.

In the summer heat Virginia took the sheep to the Vene. By now, in the drought, there was not a bit of pasture left except in these bottomlands near the water. The animals enjoyed it there in the cool; only toward evening, when the extreme heat had eased, did she have them climb the hills up to the leafy chestnut groves. Thus she passed long silent hours next to the springs, and not rarely slept in a basket of leafy boughs that resembled the den of an animal. The sheep, whether all together in a circle with their heads hanging toward the center, or scattered among the coolest

hollows, immobile in their wait for coolness, never strayed. From the plain at the bottom of the valley, toward Anterigoli and Casanova, came blasts of hot air and the high screeching of the cicadas.

Those were her good hours, far from the farm, from the people who maltreated her or felt sorry for her. She was not made to be with people, was happy only when alone. Perhaps occasionally, like a faraway light, she felt some longing to return to her mother, at Castiglioni. but her mother was no longer there, at Castiglioni. To imagine another home, an unknown house, was impossible for her: she simply felt lost. Yet she needed someone; she craved love. Sometimes she would cry. She was only completely happy in that den, like a wild animal.

One day the black oxen from Camporedalda discovered her there. Although it was prohibited, since Gherardo knew what harm grazing animals did to the woods, Rocco, the youngest son of the Gepponis, let them go down freely through the brush to the springs. An ox had breathed in her face: awakening with a start, finding herself with that great black head right above her, Virginia started to scream. From above, from a little hill, a laugh answered.

“Hah, it’s the little simpleton of Castiglioni.”

Rocco was eighteen, a weak skinny boy, retarded in his growth. In a family known for willingness to work and for good behavior, he, the child of his parents’ old age, had grown up undisciplined and malicious. Once grown, he was left to take care of the animals, an easy



job that gave him the freedom he wanted, the freedom of the woods, which to those who know them are so beautiful. His mother was ashamed of her son and had tried her best to find something useful for him to do, but he had grown up a wanderer. When they needed him they could never find him, and for heavy work no amount of calling would fetch him. He would return at night, after dark, with a blackbird or a partridge that he had snared.

As soon as he met her, the girl became his prey. Rocco climbed every day to the Vene. When she saw him come toward her, Virginia felt attracted but alarmed, like a bird under the eyes of an owl. And from him, with dismayed astonishment, she first learned the games of sensuality.

There began, with the awakening life of the senses, a slow reawakening of her mind. The more Rocco penetrated her bewildered being, as if shrewdly trailing a savage beast, the more she opened, lived, suffered, enjoyed. A subtle disquiet invaded her, interspersed with sudden spurts of happiness. From her abandon in the nervous arms of Rocco she wished never to awaken.

And then with a strange rhythm, her body seemed to flower. The eyes lit up, the movements lost their rigid monotony; she began to smile, alone, for herself. A grace diffused itself like a veil over the oval of her face, a suffering grace, wild in the frame of her unkempt hair. Her withered limbs, in the rags in which she dressed, became agile, developing harmonious

movements. The Vaghegginis, suspecting the truth, now in disgust treated her worse than ever.

Rocco day by day took possession of her with his poacher's slyness; he had found the instrument of his pleasure. Sometimes, however, her innocence frightened him. And when his desire had subsided, rather than experiencing satisfaction he felt troubled before those amazed eyes that asked without awaiting answers.

One evening Virginia arrived unexpected at Sant'Ansano. Teresa, surprised, asked her why, without getting an answer. But then she was touched to tears to feel among those fragile childish bones the bulging evidence of a woman's maturity. Never before had she been seen to cry.

IX

Before autumn they would have to renovate the stables, to provide housing for the stock they must buy. Mastiani never tired of repeating that refrain. He had already made the rounds of the fairs; to delay too long would run the risk of seeing the price of draft animals increase. Gherardo hesitated. With the vertiginous increases in expenditures for labor his cash reserves were rapidly dwindling: already, except for extraordinary help from he knew not where and for which he found himself hoping, he could foresee the moment when he would find himself seriously embarrassed. On the other hand, now that all the threads were interwoven, he couldn't turn back; everything he had done until now would be rendered null and void. And besides, though he tried not to consider this, his pride would be sorely wounded.

But the question of livestock, surely this could be postponed for another year; hadn't it been going on like this for many years? It was painful to admit it to Mastiani, but the moment came when there was no alternative. For now, he simply could not afford the expenditure.

"Oh, is that all!" Mastiani had responded with a su-

perior smile, as if he had known it all the time. "If it's only that, there are the banks. There's no alternative. To continue with the stables we have now is to give up on everything we've done so far. Without animals we can't function. We couldn't work the fields next year. Believe me, they'll be like money in the bank. If you'll permit me, at the next market I'll speak with the Director of the Agricultural Bank. You'll see, they'll give you all you need."

As always, he had been right. Gherardo put his mind at ease; Mastiani's easy confidence showed that the practice was a common one in modern agriculture. And they decided that the next Saturday they would go together to Siena to arrange a loan.

Despite the excessive distance from farm to farm, Gherardo had quit using the automobile. Driving at speed along the roads of the estate one saw nothing and besides, when Corinna or Mastiani were with him they would yell at him to avoid a ditch or a hedge when Gherardo, noting mentally what a farmer had done that he shouldn't, or had not done that he should, would wander from the middle of the road. From the carriage, or better from the saddle, and still better on foot, he could look or stop to talk without being troubled by the anxious haste of the machine.

Besides, Corinna now almost never accompanied him on his rounds. Gherardo sometimes surprised himself thinking that he abandoned her a bit too much to her own resources, but his work was taking on such a grave aspect that he couldn't feel remorse. In the

early days, when he was completely taken by the poetry of Cerreta, whenever a new aspect of its beauty was revealed to him his first thought was to have her participate in it. But now everything was different; he preferred not to talk about his worries; he certainly didn't want her to take part in them. Besides, it didn't appear that Corinna was bored. In his absence there had developed a great friendship between her, the Geminianis, and the Michelis, and it was a rare day that didn't find them together either at Cerreta or Marmoraia, but especially at Montorsaio. Gherardo preferred to abstain from these gatherings: he was not in a sociable mood these days; he had too many concerns.

It was a three-hour trip to Siena by carriage. A beautiful plain opened out from the gorge of the Rosia, took off into the hills of the Volte, and continued to the lower slopes of Siena. It was a long, slow trip, but nowadays the country had new and more personal interests for him; he viewed with envy the expanse of cultivation that a few months earlier had appeared so monotonous. Then he had felt that the hand of man, in laying out these right-angled fields delimited by parallel rows, had annihilated the land's natural beauty by domesticating it. Now, brief though his struggle with Cerreta's more rugged landscape had been, he could appreciate this more fertile land, fruitful and productive. With the widening of the plain his lungs breathed more deeply, his attention caressed with

pleasure the ordered development of the various crops of the farms; fields already broken by the plow in which the brown clods were cooking in the summer heat; green squares of meadows; fields bristling with stalks of corn. For the first time there came to him a shadow of doubt about having bought Cerreta; perhaps he should have stayed in the plain, where the land had already been improved, where there was nothing more to do than to harvest. Mastiani cheerfully spoke up: "Beautiful cropland, eh?" as if to reinforce his doubts. It didn't bother him especially. He had learned to love the bounteous lands of the plain, but doing so he felt unfaithful to Cerreta, poor rough Cerreta.

The harmonious simplicity of Rosia's campanile reminded him of the times when he would come up to Siena during his student days, now so remote, times that he remembered as happy though perhaps they had only been peaceful. He had a predilection, almost a weakness, for the Sienese painters of the fifteenth century: for their simple rural taste, for their faithfulness to traditional forms, for their precious technique of illustration, their frugality, their spiritual naiveté, while Firenze, so near and yet so far, possessed an art so much more complex and advanced. The more famous painters, the primitives, interested him less; theirs was a battle already won. Siena had always been to him the small and glorious town of the miraculous flowering of Duccio, Simone, the Lorenzettis, radiating so much light in the darkness of their times.

But today all seemed different. Perhaps the solemnity of attending to a humiliating duty predisposed him to receive a more profound impression, as in moments of sadness one is more disposed to be moved by music or by poetry. Or else his change of career had brought him to see things from a different point of view. It was a surly and jealous Siena that he saw that day, the Siena of decadence, impotent spectator of the growth of rival Florence that was imprisoning it between the mountains and the Maremma, closing off its communication with the rest of the world. That was its communal spirit: bitter and constricted, rough with cynicism and self-torture, with the loss of the purple flame of the mystics and the burning memory of Montaperti in its heart .

They left their carriage at a livery stable on the Costarella amidst the shouting of farmers and merchants. Climbing toward the Via di Città, they turned to look at the red brick mass of the church of San Domenico, powerful and imperious as a Roman ruin, perched on the edge of the hillside.

Swept up in the current of the market day crowd, Gherardo recalled his previous impression that the people were not very attractive. The women were small and thin, with irregular features, penetrating eyes, fleeting profiles. The comparison with foreigners who stopped before the monuments, healthy, tall, well built, was not to their advantage. The visitors' appearance seemed to be the product of an exuberant will to live more fully, to enjoy healthy sources of pleasure,

while the gaunt, grim Sienese showed signs of renunciation, often voluntary, sometimes exacerbated by a masochistic pleasure in the torment of a life repressed and turned inward.

In the piazza of the Monte dei Paschi bank he bumped into an Englishman, an art critic who for some years, in a nearby villa, had lived a solitary life occupying himself only with changing the names of the authors of paintings in the museums.

"What are you doing hereabouts? Anything new?"

"I've bought a property and am working at becoming a farmer. I've become Sienese."

At the admiring surprise of the other, Gherardo smiled a boastful smile.

"Some towers, a great big ugly castle; there's even a convent going to ruins in the forest. Come and see me. Straight out San Marco gate, through Rosia." "And the paintings?"

"I've been neglecting them a bit. I have so much to do up there." He himself was surprised; there next to them, the Gallery, with all its treasures. Who would have said, in less than a year. . . ?

From the threshold of a shop a man greeted him. After searching his mind for a good while he finally remembered a worker who had come to do some repairs at Cerreta.

As he passed by the Circolo Uniti club, Count Geminiani, talking animatedly in the midst of a group and watching the strollers passing by, came down to meet him, saying, "I want to introduce you to one of

your neighbors." Castelfalchi, of which Gherardo had often heard, was a half-hour by horse from Cerreta in the direction of Casole d'Elsa. Its owner, Ranieri Cennini, was a handsome youth of twenty-five; Gherardo could not help but admire his English tailoring, tempered by a certain moderate Tuscan good sense. Geminiani introduced the others. Gherardo saw before him several centuries of Sienese history. Men of distinction, feudal lords of the Maremma, distinguished gentlemen of the Renaissance, princes of the church, popes, still lived in those illustrious lineages of which the latest descendents were shaking his hand.

"He's the new padrone of Cerreta. An artist who's taken up agriculture," explained Geminiani, smiling.

"You're in for lots of pain," said an Ugurgieri seriously.

"What's the latest on Ardenghi?"

"He's always in Rome. They're trying to straighten out his inheritance. They've sold the palace on the Corso to see if they can save the estate in Chianti."

Cerreta had been one of the last pieces of the Ardenghis' feudal holdings. From the Elsa to the Merse they had once owned thirty castles.

A Tolomei took Gherardo aside:

"Artist, excuse me, of what school?"

"None. I was interested in art as a scholar."

"Come and see me at Suvera. It's ten kilometers from Cerreta. I have some bronzes that are worth seeing."

"They must be Sienese bronzes," explained Gem-

iniani. "If they're not Sienese stuff, Tolomei won't fool with them. He's gotten it into his head to make an exhibition of Sienese art. All the artists are hard on his heels."

"That's another good way to burn up money."

At the Piazza del Campo, entering into the sunlit expanse from the narrow dark streets, Gherardo lost the self-consciousness that had made him leave the men at the Uniti so rapidly, that had made him feel that everyone was looking at him saying, 'There's the crazy fellow who bought Cerreta.' Not without a certain sense of challenge, he sat on the steps of the chapel, as he once used to do when he was not yet a Sienese. The wall of the City Hall rose perpendicularly next to him, pink, discolored, in the white light of the sun. In all the vast shell of the Campo there was not a single soul.

At lunch, in the hotel that he used to frequent, the waiter greeted him with an air of vague recognition. Gherardo, although ashamed of his childish boasting, couldn't restrain himself from revealing that he had bought Cerreta. The waiter, up to date on the life, death, and exploits of Count Ardenghi, entertained him at length, clearly exaggerating on the deeds of that cheerful gentleman. Gherardo felt obliged to recognize the confidences afforded him by adding an unusually generous tip to the bill, such that the waiter honored him with a deferential but at the same time familiar goodbye.

Exiting into the crowded street, he ran into the

priest of Cerreta. Don Vanzetti was involved in an enthusiastic discussion, red in the face, overheated, talking in a loud voice, assisted by abundant gestures like a manager dealing in big business. He too had come to do some shopping.

It was time to find Mastiani and attend to their business; he had almost forgotten about it. It was not easy to re-enter practical life, to wake up from that daydream. He had rediscovered Siena, visited with it, like bumping into an old friend one has lost track of, with whom one finds interests in common more vital than before.

The conference with the directors of the Bank was not unpleasant. It seemed as if they had been waiting for him, that it was a true pleasure to give him their money. They had him sign some papers and gave him a check book.

On the return trip they talked little. Dusk fell; the days were getting shorter. When they reached the mouth of the Rosia, Mastiani observed that from now on they would have to leave earlier; the day before, on the road to Colle, the manager of Mensano had been held up as he was returning from market.

In the silences that fell rhythmically with the trotting of the mare, Gherardo felt himself invaded by a growing ill humor. He was tired, and the prospect the business conversation had placed before him was not encouraging. The line of credit opened by the bank might do for six months, a year. At the end of this year the interest on the mortgage would come due. Besides

the expenses of construction there were the usual ones: the taxes, the salaries. And income was scant for the moment. He needed to put it all on the table one of these days, look everything over, make a concrete, definitive plan. And reduce the expenses, the projects. On entering the territory of Cerreta these concerns became alive, immediate; he could no longer sidestep them with a change of his thoughts.

At home he found Corinna in a good mood. That morning the postman, an old man who laboriously made the long trip every day on foot from Pian di Fecchia to Montorsaio and Cerreta, had brought her a long-awaited package. When she had become aware that she had nothing to wear that was appropriate for the country and was also becoming to her, she had ordered a dress to which she had devoted long study and great love. To receive and make visits in hunting clothes and boots, like the people of Montorsaio, was not in her character; but her regular clothing was really too citified for Cerreta. She had made use of some walking clothes, masking them with various tricks to make them less haughty, but when confronting the neighbors she felt ill at ease in not being in the appropriate style for the occasion. And every time she opened her closet, her evening dresses made her both smile and sigh; they were so light and airy, consisting of so little material. To put on a new dress, to find that it was right, that it was what she wanted, had given her a pang of joy, bringing back the emotion of the first

long skirt, the first low-cut neckline.

In the afternoon the Caprolatos had come by, the padroni of Guinzane, an estate that from Casole d'Elsa extended towards Volterra. They were not the most likeable neighbors one might wish for, but they did form a public for her new dress, and the husband was a man to appreciate it. A retired captain of cavalry of the Siena garrison, he had succeeded in entering into the good graces of a rich unmarried lady, orphaned and elderly, to the point of marrying her and with her around a hundred farmsteads. The wife, who had not known how to pass her days, now had plenty to do. She was jealous, and the no longer young but still sprightly captain didn't want to waste his last good years; she had, however, judiciously kept control of the purse strings and knew how to call him to order.

Certainly that afternoon Corinna had not made a friend. Caprolato fawned on her in an old-fashioned chivalrous way that pleased her but played havoc on the nerves of the wife. Moved by some little devil that remained in her blood from earlier days, Corinna let him do it, enticing him and spurning him at the same time.

Gherardo was not exactly in the proper mood to appreciate the new dress. Perhaps a few days earlier he would have been gratified by it, even if only because it represented an appropriate interpretation of her role. It was not a stylish dress nor did she mean it to be, she told him immediately with a certain nonchalant pride, like an aristocrat who affects popular speech or dis-

dains the conventional, nevertheless following certain standards subtle enough to compensate for those picturesque improprieties. If Gherardo had been in a mood to hear it, Corinna's dress could have spoken to him like this: "When you return and dusk is falling, and fatigue drags you down, and perhaps the more subtle poison of some disillusionment affects your mind, I am here just to tell you that even if everything disappoints you, there is someone here who awaits to comfort you. Relax; I am the visible sign of the spirit of your woman, who holds dear the things that you love."

There was no need for Gherardo to open his mouth, because Corinna realized that her little effect had misfired, or rather, for some reason that she could not fathom, her dress had only served to irritate him.

"You know, the people from Guinzane stopped by."

"Ah, that southerner who married Bracci Faltognani. She's super rich."

And, despite himself, into that 'super rich' had infiltrated a bit of that envious and almost spiteful admiration that he despised in Mastiani or Micheli.

"He was sorry to have missed you. He's not so bad, actually. We found we had mutual acquaintances; he's a friend of half of Rome. It's a surprise to run into a man of that type up here."

These words, that Corinna knew would irritate Gherardo, she just couldn't hold back in her spiteful mood. Gherardo had met Caprolato at Montorsaio,

and judged him at his true worth. He had a vision of Corinna peacocking around in the new dress in front of that dissolute captain while he salivated over the forbidden fruit. In the beginning of their relationship Gherardo had scorned Corinna's way of smiling at everyone, of being pleasing to all. With his reserve he would have nothing to do with people who he didn't consider worthy. Corinna's promiscuous pleasure in the admiration of all men, even of Caprolato's type, offended him deeply. It was to please such people that Corinna got these new dresses. Without reflecting that Corinna had no way of knowing he had such feelings, he harbored a repressed resentment. With the bluntness that women sometimes show when they are unaware of the need to soften the rough edges, Corinna, who was beginning to realize that this was not just a passing cloud, put her finger on the wound: "What's the matter, some business difficulties?"

It had always been the custom in Corinna's family to freely discuss such matters. The impossibility of balancing the family budget, when expenses always exceeded income, required them every so often to disappear into the country, or to save on the purchase of such so-called necessities as the dinner table, eliminating extras, and especially clothing. Corinna was used to every sort of saving, but never to the point of dressing poorly.

Her clairvoyance upset Gherardo, like a horse approaching a jump spurred at the wrong moment. Either he had an exaggerated modesty about his financial

embarrassment, or he was bothered not to find Corinna circumspect on the subject, or his sensitivities were painfully sharpened by the troubles of the day, but he felt the urge to hurt her.

"Let's talk instead about Caprolato, since he interests you."

"Oh God, he's just a man like all the rest," was her lively reply. "He's just like everyone else, don't you realize? He throws out his bait. The fault is with whoever swallows it." She had never spoken so freely to Gherardo, opening for him this new perspective on how women see men. She had had experience of such types since infancy, and accepted their existence as a disagreeable but inevitable fact of life, like the sailor who lives through dangers in his everyday life that would instill terror in the landlubber. Although she had always attempted to avoid them, now she felt a duty to make excuses for them, as if in defending them she also defended her past, or what could have been her past. But she noticed that she was seriously hurting him. Those wrinkles on his forehead that at times she had enjoyed pointing out mischievously, and that a smile had sufficed to dissipate, this evening scared her. She abruptly changed the subject.

"You know, I've been to see the work at Casetta. I stayed behind to talk with that old stonemason; I couldn't leave. He seemed to be giving a lecture. He has the tone of a professor who loves his subject."

"I know. They call him the engineer. He always has a plumb line and a level in his hand."

"He got to talking about Rome; went on and on. He was there for several years, it seems." It was always a surprise, someone from up here that had gone to the city.

"Yes; he left at the time of Count Ardenghi, when they stopped work. He returned recently."

"I hope you won't scold me for making him lose an hour of work."

"No; he's paid a fixed price for the job," Gherardo laughed, with a petty sense of victory.

"He talked about Count Ardenghi, about his unfinished projects. And he said with solemnity that finally Cerreta has had a bit of luck, that it has the padrone it needs. According to him rumors are going around that when the houses are ready the best families of the region will be asking for them."

"You believe it? It's always so difficult to motivate people . . ."

"The word going around is good, he said."

"He said nothing about when he expects to finish, at Casetta? It's several days since I've been by there."

"In November he wants to have it roofed to permit work under cover in the winter, so that the house can be ready for living in the spring."

Gherardo had calmed down, but it was humiliating to Corinna to have to stoop to these subterfuges. He had made an ally of the land, and sometimes, such as now, it appeared to her that the land of Cerreta was her rival. But it was well to recognize it, to take it into account, and to accept the need to take second place

and not swim against the current; perhaps this is the ordeal of every woman whose man dedicates himself to accomplishing a major work in his life.

X

It was Sandro, the Geminiani boy, who awakened in Corinna, not as a reflection from Gherardo, but as something of her own, her first real identification with Cerreta. Until now, she had contented herself with observing Gherardo coming alive on this land; it had never occurred to her that she might become interested in it in her own right. There was between her and the land, as the person who for her represented it, always Gherardo. She had seen Cerreta through his eyes, as it were, and even if she happened to admire a view, a sunset, she felt detached from it; it belonged to Gherardo.

In her previous life she had never considered things except as subordinated to people; she had never conceived that they could be interesting in themselves. Like a person who goes to live in a foreign country and little by little begins to feel the world of a new language opening around her, she began to learn the alphabet of nature. But this couldn't happen without slowly changing all her values, compelling her to create, so to speak, a new musical scale of the spirit. And in the intimate and lively sympathy that developed between her and Sandro, a growing sense of the beauty

of nature was their constant companion.

Sandro was not subject to the great enthusiasms and sudden depressions that affected Gherardo; he breathed the forest, the thickets, like the wild animals; he was part of them. In the woods his too slender legs took on an almost feline agility as he moved through the scrub. He wouldn't speak, no longer was interested in discussion. Frowning, he would bend to examine tracks in the earth, consider what animal had made them and when they were made, stop to listen to sounds, rustlings that she didn't hear, make impatient gestures for her to be quiet. He spotted kites and falcons high in the sky; by an instinct quicker than hers he pointed out a flight of pigeons, a rising turtledove, a jay perched on a turkey oak opening the fan of its streaked blue wings. He showed her the tiny marvels of rocks, plants, and insects; the glistening reflections of quartz and metallic pebbles; the traitorous beauty of poisonous grubs; the harmony of ferns, lichens, and mosses; bizarre little creatures that alone she would never have seen.

Once when Corinna was about to lean on a ruined wall Sandro quickly took her arm, pointing out to her the triangular head of a little snake tucked between some stones, exactly where she was about to put her hand to climb up. It was immobile, as if it didn't see; it appeared jewel-like. With a pointed branch Sandro hit it on the head. The snake raised on its tail and, with mouth open, darting the thin forked tongue, searched here and there, blind, for the enemy. When it fell back

Sandro struck it again, and without letting go, impaled it on the ground. The snake's entire body writhed in continually renewed waves; by the time the twisting stopped his arm was numb. It was a viper.

Stopping to rest in the shade, near a spring or in the hollow of an isolated forest thicket so sheltered from the rest of the world that the sky was invisible, Sandro would relate with pleasure stories told to him late at night on the farms, tales passed from mouth to mouth like legends. When a story had become his own, he himself could not have said where and when it was told to him, or how much his imagination had added, as sometimes happens with certain bits of a dream that remain in the mind and one does not remember if they are reality or if real life is trying to re-enter the dream. Corinna watched him, as children do who follow with surprised eyes the movements of a storyteller's lips. She lay back supine on the ferns; a bit of pale sky filtered through the oak leaves to her partially closed eyes. Sometimes, pretending to herself that she was a boy, she would take his hand. She found a great peace in its fragility, warm in hers like a bird in its nest; the sounds and silence of the forest filled her completely. It seemed as if through that hand she could feel extending into her the vitality of the sap in the trunks, of the leaves that drink air and light, and of the mysterious fecundations of the pollen.

And they enjoyed their silences. Sandro, serious, would take on the vacuous but attentive expression of a hunter on the alert. Sometimes, rousing, he would

begin to talk about himself. This year he would be going off to high school; up until now he had had tutors at home to give him a smattering of literature and Latin. To tell the truth his grandfather didn't pay much attention to his education, nor did Sandro have any flair for studies. But his mother was dead serious on the subject, refusing to yield: this year he would have to go off to school in Rome, giving up a good part of the hunting season, his paradise. No more waiting in the blind, during the days of the migrations with flocks of starlings dropping to skim the oaks with their immense roaring and whistling of wings. Sandro and his grandfather would carry caged birds to lure the thrushes that weighed in the hand like quail, the hawk finches, the shrikes, the *mattugie*. Watching from the blind, now one now the other, sometimes both together, would shoot at a flock. "This year, some days hunting a few quail and partridge, a bit of rabbit hunting, and that's all. Who knows if grandfather will decide to do a boar hunt; usually he waits until all the estates round about have done theirs, then rounds up the boars that have escaped to Montorsaio, so that he does the last, the best hunt." Last year Sandro had killed his first boar, a great male that was beginning to grow tusks. To Rome, what a nuisance!

Corinna wanted him to use the familiar style of speech instead of the respectful 'lei'. The boy promised but couldn't get used to it, yet when his tongue stumbled on the word 'tu' her pleasure was almost maternal. At such moments she felt a bitter sweetness in

not being able to take him on her lap, but he was as tall as she was. As she became closer to him in spirit she felt that it was not so much that he was a child as that she was becoming younger. The difference in their ages was not really that much, seven or eight years; but she was a woman and he a boy. Walking back home he took her hand, or she put hers on his shoulder. The boy, she felt, was proud to initiate her into the world of the forest that meant so much to him.

Meanwhile September was maturing, with the flourishing of the grapes and fruits and the melancholy of the shortening days. The great heat was past; there in the hills even the dog days of summer were supportable, but the peasants lamented the dryness; the grapes and olives were starting to suffer. It's true that in the country people complain about every season, but this year even in the woods the plants were parched. Leaves were turning yellow, curling, the foliage was peeling, begging for a little water. Springs were drying up; the beautiful clear streams of the Vene and of the Filicaie were reduced to muddy trickles, green, losing themselves in the arid sands. In the chestnut groves empty husks were beginning to fall; the chestnut crop would fail.

One afternoon when Corinna was almost asleep at the foot of a great tree she was roused by drops of rain falling on her face. Without their noticing, the sky had clouded over. In a moment it started to rain furiously,

as if to quench that ravenous thirst. They ran toward a chestnut drying hut in a chestnut grove that Sandro knew. Under the roar of the rain the great leaves were inextricably tangled. Among the patter of innumerable drops on the leaves of the chestnut trees from time to time was heard the roar of thunder up over the hills of Montorsaio, where it seemed that the storm was gathering with renewed force. Under the foliage of a great tree a flock of sheep was sheltering, all squeezed together in a group, hiding their hanging heads in a woolly tangle of heavy soaked fleece, thin, miserable, pitiful.

At the hut, Corinna pushed the door open; on the soft layer of chaff that covered the ground something moved in the dark. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness she could distinguish two figures pulling back in the shadows. A tangle of rags, a patched and mended man's jacket covered Virginia of Castiglioni from head to foot; as far into the corner as possible was a boy, still, holding his breath. Virginia hid her face behind her sleeve and started to cry, moaning from time to time. As Corinna moved backward the boy dodged through the door and started running down the hill. After a moment, flattening herself against the wall and turning away her face, the girl also ran out. Corinna didn't dare look at Sandro, but she had the impression that he too was on the verge of laughter.

They stayed for a while looking out at the water that fell from the leaves and ran down the trunks, letting itself be absorbed in the parched earth for the

well-being of the thirsty plants. But then, feeling soaked through, Corinna began to worry about Sandro. She told him to take off his wet sweater: He didn't want to. She then adopted a very serious, maternal tone; if he got a cold they would say it was her fault. Sandro pulled it over his head; his clammy half-unbuttoned shirt underneath revealed his thin white arms. She too felt the chill soak her through to the bone but didn't know what to do; she had so little on under her blouse. It's icy touch finally became too much for her, made her decide to slip it off; they needed to light a fire and dry their clothes. Seeing herself half dressed, the desire to laugh overcame the embarrassment. The fine material that completely hid her breasts looked more intimate than the nudity it concealed. Sandro couldn't resist the pleasure of looking, but as soon as she started to turn her back he turned his gaze away. She couldn't say whether it was because of the well-being she felt at being free of the clammy clothes or because of the caress of that look, but she felt so alive in all her body, so happy. In a corner were the remains of the fires that had served for drying chestnuts. They hung the clothing on two sticks, piled up some wood, set fire to a handful of heather. The flame flared up quickly; it was a pleasure to stretch out bare arms toward the heat. But the pleasure was brief; smoke collected; they had to escape crying and coughing to fresh air. Outside they squeezed against the wall, under the eaves; the rain had abated and the voice of the grove had lost its earlier fury, changing to

a deeper monotone. But then they heard a soft moaning, somewhere between the whining of a dog and the broken hiccuppy whimpering of a tired child. Leaning around the corner they saw Virginia. Corinna took her by the arm, pulled her to herself, in the middle between them.

"What is it?" The child didn't respond. "Are you afraid? Do you want us to take you home?" By now it had quit raining. With her face in her sleeve, the child finally confessed:

"I'm missing three sheep."

Meanwhile they were freezing; they tried to re-enter the hut, but the smoke was still flowing out in great billowing clouds. By crawling quickly in and out Sandro was able to retrieve their clothes. Sullenly the child clung to Corinna like a lost dog that sniffs everywhere while staying close to someone who has petted it.

"But how did you lose them? Where?"

"It was down in the valley, at the Vene. It was so hot. I was sleeping, and the rain started coming down in great drops as big as coins. I started to round up the sheep, but they didn't want to follow; the more I tried, the more stubborn they were. With the storm, I became confused. Then there was a huge lightning stroke like I've never seen before."

She looked them in the eyes, now at Corinna, now at Sandro; she found it difficult to search her memory.

"One old ewe is missing, the one the guard wanted to sell; maybe she stayed down below, by some crag,

under some shelter; she was sick. And a black one, with a lamb.

Maybe, Corinna thought to herself, she could help her; after all she was the *padrona*.

"They've gotten lost in some gully; don't worry, you didn't do it on purpose. We'll have the guards look; they'll be found, you'll see. Come on, we'll take you home."

The sky cleared. The mountains came close again in the clarity of air fresh from the rain. From the chestnuts a few big drops fell from branch to branch. Coming out of the fog, the valley showed a new definition, sculptured in a deep relief of memorably crystal-line limpidity. In the distant fields one could still see furrows in the grain created by the furious gusts, and tangles of the strongest stems that were already trying to unravel and rise again. All the vegetation was green again, enlivened. Saplings with trunks still half-grown, their leaves washed, breathed more freely. There was a great freshness of satisfied thirst, of parts that stretched, agile, rising as if in thanks.

At the top of a small hill dark with ilex, they found themselves on the lower slopes of Montecchio. They were a miserable parade: first the sheep, dejected, with dripping soaked fleece, their bent heads too large for bodies skinny with their wet wool plastered down as if they had been shorn, then the little shepherdess, followed by Corinna and finally Sandro in a world of his own.

In no area of the estate so much as on that little,

steep, barren hill of Montecchio was there such clear evidence of the tenacious and intelligent work of previous generations. Despite collapsed dry stone walls, obstructed ditches and channels, borders invaded by brambles, planting rows invaded by brush, the work of terracing was still sculpted into the hill, like the architectural traces of roads and squares in a dead city abandoned for centuries. Soon they were in a farmyard which at that hour was animated like the piazza of a village on Sunday after mass.

The housewife was sweeping mud and puddles from the cobbles. At the door of the stable the tenant farmer, pipe in mouth, looked out through the clear air to his faraway fields of the Vene, down in the valley, where he seemed to see the grass growing green as he watched. They exchanged the usual talk about the weather and the changing of the seasons that formed the convenient and required preamble to all peasant conversations and that also had a true and real interest in the country, where men, like the land and the vegetation, enjoyed the good seasons and endured the bad.

Everyone came out to see the visitors. The old man who used to lead the sheep to pasture before Virginia took on the job was leaning against the wall watching them with a fixed look, vacuous, moronic, as if not seeing them. In no case like that of workers of the land does extreme old age appear so pitiful. He is the worn out tool, useless. His is the wait, always long, for death. Yet, in a farm family the old are less of a burden than in villages or in the city, where the poor must buy

everything. The little that suffices for an old person doesn't count; on a farm it isn't even noticed. It is fair that those whom he has brought up should now help him and keep him. And because of the slowness and monotony of country life, the succession of the generations seems closer. But perhaps it is the endless work of the farm, the ever-present need for manpower, that more than elsewhere makes the old folks seem so much of a burden.

One by one the oxen came out of the stable, enormous, black necks like buffalo, crookedly bowing their great lunate horns. A boy jumped on the back of a sorrel mare to drive the animals up the road to water them at San Bernardino. The youths and children stood watching them, the youngest children of the farmer and the children of his oldest children, four generations of Vagheggini watching Corinna with that friendly curiosity that she had come to feel in many.

In growing embarrassment about the task she had taken on Corinna felt herself drawn toward the housewife, who appeared to be the most open-minded and most capable. It was the first time that she had assumed a role in the activity of Cerreta, and she couldn't clearly imagine how much the loss of these sheep might mean to the peasants; she was lost in the mysteries of tenant farming. The housewife, perhaps made suspicious by Virginia's way of acting, looking over the flock and immediately noting that they were not all there, switched suddenly from the calm courtesy that she had demonstrated to an agitated counte-

nance: "Where's Nerina? How many are you missing?"

Virginia clung to Corinna as if to remind her of her promise.

"We found this child in despair, in that downpour. I brought her here. We'll send the guard to search for those that are missing."

"But how many are missing?" repeated the housewife, as if she had not heard.

"Three, she said, one with a lamb and another an old ewe. You'll see that they'll find them down below in the valley."

"Fine, if they haven't been taken by the shepherds that pass by on the road."

To shorten the discussion, Corinna took on a harder tone: "Now then, if you harm a hair on this child's head. . . ."

"Easy for you to say! For your part the loss matters little; but for us peasants it's another thing." And with unexpected force: "This little witch that secretly gives herself to the men, now. . . ." She grabbed Virginia's hand and dragged her to the middle of the courtyard, "Look at the only ones you're useful to, the men!"

"Leave her alone!" ordered Corinna. "I'll tell the padrone."

As if with these words she had conjured him up, Gherardo appeared at the steep edge of the courtyard. The scene had taken on almost the tone of an altercation. He stood still there for a moment, then, followed by the guard Pasquale and the stonemason, climbed down.

Gherardo had great admiration for the Vagheggini woman. He knew that she was the soul of the family, one of the three or four that despite the difficult conditions of Cerreta had succeeded in surviving life there, and even put aside a bit for the end of the year. He knew with what an iron hand she managed the sons, two of whom, already married, had wanted to move away with their wives; how she was able to be productive in so many ways, with silkworms, with honey from the forest. She was an intelligent, capable woman; he admired her, seemed to see in her a secret greatness, hidden behind her humility. Corinna's tone had displeased him: the sheep were one of the farmers' most valuable resources; she couldn't understand these things.

When the whole situation had been explained to him he ordered Pasquale to go immediately with Virginia to search for the sheep, more than anything to demonstrate his support for Corinna. The housewife pointed out to him: "You've seen that flock of sheep before. There are no others like them on the estate. The lambs of Montecchio weigh twice as much as the others. But now, with her . . . believe me, lately she's completely changed. She used to be stupid, but now I say she's crazy. Love has gone to her head."

"If she doesn't suit you, send her back home. But to treat her badly is worse. It confuses her, discourages her. . . ."

"And us, without a shepherd, what will we do?"

"Is it possible that among all that bunch of kids

there's not one that's capable of herding a flock of sheep?"

"They're still small, signor padrone. You know how kids are? They get together in the woods, two or three shepherds, start to play, and the sheep go God knows where. And the job takes some skill; to know where to take them to pasture according to the seasons, and where to water them, and how to keep them together, not lose them."

Gherardo had learned to keep quiet; there were so many things for which there was no solution. Now the old man sighed and said: "At least I could do it."

Although no one paid any attention to him, the old man started talking to himself, since no one else was speaking. "There's nothing for me to do anymore. When I had to leave the sheep because of my eyes, I said: this means that I will spend more time with the plants. To hoe around the grapes, to weed the grain a bit in the spring, doesn't take much strength. There are lots of things that an old man can do. But every day is worse. Even my head doesn't tell me the truth any more. I get dizzy; that's a bad sign. They say when one is old you need to put your mind at peace, but. . . ."

"How old are you?"

"By the saints, I'm eighty-three."

"So what more do you want? You're healthy; you should be happy."

"But Faustino of the Donati is three years older than me, and he's in the fields every day. But it's true

that he no longer understands anything. He's as deaf as a post."

Behind the house the sky was already violet; every day dark was coming a little earlier. Gherardo got up to go into the stable with the stonemason to study how to open a drain in the crumbling floor; Corinna followed them to the door. The last words of the old man remained unanswered in the air: "What will happen now, padrone?"

XI

Now that her work was finished, Teresa was seated, as usual at that hour, on one of the travertine columns that had tumbled from the ruins of the convent down to the bottom of the garden, and hung on the edge of the Rosia gorge. In the ravine of Sant'Ansano the sun had set a while ago, although the slope of Le Palazze was still pink from the reflection of the sunset. Resting, she organized in her mind the things to do, the tasks for the evening and the next day, weighed the day's accomplishments; and worried that she never was able to complete everything, that she was always behind, like one who can never see the end of the road, can't relax with a sense of clear, obtainable objectives. Just as she would have done if she were talking to someone else; even with herself was full of complaints, yet under it all there was a great feeling of contentment.

Satisfaction with the freshly whitewashed old rooms at Sant'Ansano, next door to Boccini, was gradually permeating her, but still a certain anxiety remained. She had been worried for too long not to fear that what little good had happened to her might suddenly be taken away, with no reason other than

fate. Virginia was late; she was undependable, forgot everything; the same chores needed to be done every day, but still she forgot.

By now it was three months since they had come to Sant'Ansano. With that grace of Providence by which the good of the present erases the bad of the past, the earlier years were left behind in the thickets of Castiglioni. Sometimes, just as when the wind overcame the fog that inundated the valleys, and the tower of Montarrenti appeared in the heat of the sun, the old anxieties and fears smoldering in memory blazed as if alive and present, like embers under ashes that needed only a breath of air to reignite. And she would fear that the great change was a dream, that it would disappear on awakening.

With the roar of a straining motor on the road that flanked the streambed in the ravine, the postal automobile passed by. Teresa rose. Her tall and strong-boned body was still handsome, her carriage composed as she walked. In the rough face, with the skin tight on her cheeks and the forehead marked by a few strong furrows, there was still a nobility in her features that surprised the children when on Sunday morning, nicely dressed, they would go up to Cerreta for mass. "Mamma is always beautiful."

She crossed the garden where among the twisted vines of the last beans enormous squash were ripening. Over the low darkness in the valley, the sky appeared clearer than in full daylight. At the top of a hill of tilled earth the grandmother was watering a square of

radicchio. Alongside, some small late hardy zinnias brightened the shadows with strong colors. Teresa remembered the little garden at Castiglioni.

But where was Virginia? Since she had returned from Montecchio Virginia had changed. Montecchio had done her a lot of good; she had come back to reason, and the glum muteness that had separated her from her peers had lifted from her like the shadow of an evil cloud. She had learned to laugh again, like a small child. But sometimes, when she was not aware of being watched, she would fall into a deep sadness, like a tired and abandoned creature.

The young oxen popped out from the path that led to the lower fields, and behind at a distance came Teresa's son Amedeo. He had turned the animals loose, and they were dawdling along to browse on the bushes, stripping off the fresher tufts. They were two young Maremma mountain animals, with strong skin, smooth of form but small; and they would remain small, as rough as the brambles. On hearing Teresa's voice they stopped, standing still and listening. With high heads, horns pointed, eyes mobile and attentive, they seemed beasts of the forest surprised by an unusual sound. Teresa stood watching them; she was still not used to such riches, tangible signs of the steps they had taken in becoming tenant farmers.

When Amedeo had returned from the service, the padrone and the foreman had come to look over some of the abandoned rooms: "What about a pair of oxen for this land? There are those young ones at Anteri-

goli. We can make a stable here below." Teresa had called Amedeo; he would be head of the family. Even just to hear these things said was for them as if a patch of blue sky had opened; they remained speechless as if overcome.

They didn't want to appear content too soon, otherwise who knows what the farm administration would imagine, perhaps that they didn't deserve much credit for the effort that would be required. Thus they had found a hundred obstacles; distances were too great, they weren't used to handling animals, there was little pasture at Sant'Ansano, the oxen wouldn't do well in that humid stable.

Gherardo had listened: "If you really can't do it, it would be better if you didn't take it on. And then, when one does things against one's will . . ." Now Amedeo had to take a risk: "If there were a little income, something in view, we could try, to please the padrone."

Ruggero had lost patience: "Fools and ignoramuses! He offers them to you so you can earn a mouthful of bread, so you'll have a full stable and your work lightened. These are animals that bring a profit; they're pregnant; when they deliver you'll recover your money through the calves."

Teresa couldn't continue to play a part with that blessed man, the padrone who smiled as if he had sworn to make himself liked by force. There was no other way; one had to deal with him honestly. As soon as the padrone had left, Amedeo was off on the short-

cut to Antegiroli to see the animals in pasture. Between mother and son nothing had been said; with Amedeo there was little small talk. He was closed and touchy, but they understood each other. When the stonemason came to finish the plastering and the floor of the stable, Teresa also found many jobs for him in the house. The mason was a bit resistant, didn't have any orders; but Teresa sweet-talked him with certain words that she was able to vaguely suggest came from the mouth of the padrone, and he just couldn't refuse.

Pasquale the guard came to break the animals to the yoke. He never missed the opportunity to pass by Sant'Ansano and visit with Teresa. One ox was willing but the other lazy, so it was quite a job. Then there was the need to buy a cart. That was up to the tenant farmer, but Pasquale had found one available, payable over time, and he had had it overhauled by the carpenter at the Fattoria. Also from the farm center came a plow, a light plow; from two animals that size one couldn't expect more. Pasquale thought of everything.

Amedeo said: "I've finished plowing the big field." Those three or four hectares of flat land along the Rossia at the lower slopes of Monte Acuto were land newly reclaimed. The farm had been abandoned since a time beyond living memory, when the people of Sant'Ansano, as the old folk recounted, were dying of malaria. Its house had remained empty until poor old Boccini had moved in, when his brothers had kicked him off their farm when it was split up. At the time of the Corporation that poor man, lost to the world like

a leaf in the wind, had taken refuge there; he went to work in the logging at Cerreta, like so many others. But he was born a farmer, and when he quit the woods, which was not his kind of work, seeing those wild vines that lay on the neglected slopes under tangles of brush, he couldn't resist. He took a spade, cleared the earth down to the roots, straightened the vines tying them to stakes, propagated new vines from the older ones. In three or four years he had reconstituted the vineyard. He should have been paid for that work, but he wasn't a man to draw attention to himself; he was too wretched. The more misfortune raged against him the more he thrived there, serene in his humility. He had been given a small herd of sheep to take care of, but he was inexperienced and didn't know where to take them to pasture, especially toward the end of winter when there was no longer a blade of grass at Sant'Ansano. Thus the crop of lambs went badly and his debt with the office grew. He got it into his head that the house was bewitched; he had heard tell certain stories that in ancient times the monastery of Sant'Ansano had been shut down by the pope because the monks were plagued by evil spirits, perhaps personified by the brothers of the not far away convent of Torri. Then one morning, when his young lambs couldn't stand upright in their stall because the moles had gnawed their hoofs, he had no further doubt. He put up charms against the evil; attached sprigs of juniper to the door; the local witch came to count the needles and left at dawn. But the lambs

sickened, the lambs died, just the same. Then he went to the *stregone* of Monticiano, a great sorcerer who was famous for dealing with animals. This one made other spells, put a film of oil in a soup plate and, turning it rapidly with a finger, said who knows what strange words to send the evil spirits away in peace.

Gherardo and Corinna had a weakness for poor Boccini; perhaps because of the memory of the welcome he had given them to Cerreta. His way of not letting himself be disturbed by his misfortunes had earned him a certain respect, though to tell the truth everyone made a joke of him, especially Mastiani, who said with a big laugh, "He's harmless." To improve his luck Gherardo had given him, without charge, a pregnant sow, so that he could rear a brood of range pigs in the woods. By Easter eight piglets were born, but dear God, how they trembled! Boccini was at a loss what to do. Ruggero came to take a look; they had a nerve disease, St. Vitus' dance. They did nothing but shiver, day and night, until they all died. Then Boccini decided to go to Massa, to the chief *stregone* of the area; but he would need to pay fifty lira. Teresa had feared that she would not get along with Boccini as a neighbor; she knew that, at least between women, so many difficulties could arise. But it was also a consolation to have a neighbor; poor people help each other. By now they had acquired a certain status at Sant'Ansano, especially since they had gotten the oxen. The animals had lost weight with all the work they had done. In that hard earth, plowed for the first time, the plow barely

scratched the surface, turning only the top layer of sod. To tame it would require several years, but this was good red earth that could be productive.

It had got dark; down below the Rosia was bubbling. But where was Virginia? Teresa started to make her evening rounds before going in for the night. She was concerned for her daughter. In the hen house, on their perches, the chickens were sleeping. In the pigsty the sow, drinking noisily at the trough, was splashing the piglets that were suckling, crowded under her. In the dark of their pen one could see the round woolly backs of the sheep lying there. A few heads turned slowly toward the air that filtered through the door. In the stable Amedeo was cleaning up the straw bedding. The heifers were head down in the fresh hay that overflowed abundantly from the feeding trough. The animals were being tended.

Leaving, Teresa saw a human form coming down through the chestnuts. It was Virginia. She called her. A tired voice answered, "Oh, mamma!" Virginia had been to Camporedalda. For several days she had been feeling the first movement of the creature that was growing in her womb. At first she didn't understand, was at a loss; but then she couldn't help going to tell Rocco. Since she had returned to Sant'Ansano he had suffered in no longer having her available for his pleasure. He immediately wanted to have his way with her; then she told him everything. Rocco understood that there would be trouble. Get married, him? But he was just a boy. Lose his liberty, from one day to the next?

He was born a bird of the woods. Too bad for her. Or didn't she know, before, when she was enjoying herself, what could happen? The worst was that the little stupid hadn't known anything except the great enjoyment of feeling a little pleasure. He glanced at her; now she appeared indifferent to him, seemed not to think any more about him, giving up, abandoned. He felt a certain pity, was proud of that noble sentiment, and, as if that sentiment had accomplished something, he felt relieved. True, if someone else were responsible he would have jumped to her defense, poor thing. But he was not made to marry; he was a born vagabond; to become a family man when he hadn't yet seen anything of the world was out of the question. He stayed quiet for a bit, while Virginia looked fixedly down the valley, not thinking of anything except to leave, to escape without anyone seeing her, to flee to some place far from there, far from everyone.

Teresa asked her when she had first known. She tried to calculate how far along she was in her pregnancy. She held her close, in the dark, and smoothed her hair. Suddenly, from the house, the voice of Amedeo recalled them from their thoughts out there in the dark:

"When do we eat?"

"Be careful not to let Amedeo know," said Teresa softly.

Virginia was comforted; felt herself protected, secure. The worry slid off her back, like a bit of mud that might have been stuck to her clothing.

XII

The hunt scheduled for the next day had been more or less imposed on Gherardo. He had a strong suspicion that he was not a hunter, and besides he had many other things on his mind, but everyone went to work to persuade him, to make him realize that it befitted his position to submit and think no more about it. If he passed by a peasant down in the valley there were laments about the damage boars were doing to the fields; with the growth of the scrub brush they had so greatly increased in numbers that nothing was safe from them. If he went to watch the cutting in the forest, a voice would come from the brush, "Signor padrone, when will we have the hunt?" At the Fattoria the old guard Menciatti cautioned that there had always been a hunt at Cerreta and that everyone counted on it; it was the poetry in their rustic lives. Pasquale said nothing, but that was almost worse; one could feel that he was suffering internally. Ruggero confirmed that those beasts, if they were not controlled, did great damage, especially in the corn, not so much because of what they ate as what they destroyed by trampling. Then when Corinna joined in, wanting to give Sandro this pleasure before his depar-

ture, Gherardo gave up in despair. The guards, rather advising him than asking his permission, settled on the coming Sunday so that a day of work would not be lost. And they started making the rounds to give out the invitations. Corinna would take care of refreshments, but she had no way of knowing how many would come; from every estate, in addition to the owners, they invited the farm staff and those peasants who were passionate hunters, to keep them happy and help prevent poaching. The assembly point was fixed at the stream of the Filicaie, around eight. Any earlier and it would still be dark.

The evening before the night sky had been crystal clear, starlit as if for lovers, crisp with not a breath of wind. "The weather is propitious," had solemnly declared Menciatti in the piazza of the Fattoria, turning to each of the four cardinal points of the compass. After dinner Gherardo had gone to the Fattoria where, under the hood of the huge fireplace, there was a circle of contradictory voices discussing the goings and comings of the boars. Among the legs of the men sleepy dogs moved close to the glowing embers, only to pull back when, too close, the desired warmth was changed to pain from being burned.

"They'll certainly be found between the Vallone and Poggio al Santo."

"They're always there."

Menciatti repeated like a refrain, "They're always in the wheat and corn, but when you go to find 'em . . ."

In general the forecasts were good. There were

plenty of good dogs. At Cerreta of he old pack there remained only Guerrino and two or three mongrels that had grown up on their own around the Fattoria, suited more to hunt bread than boars; but at Montorsaio and Castelfalchi, where they really cared about hunting they had bred dogs for the purpose. They had invited Ricciolo, a famous poacher who had two veteran hounds covered with wounds who would do anything to flush out boars, and would never give up.

"Now he's old, Ricciolo, but in his day, what a hunter! In the time of young Count Ulderigo," Pasquale recounted — by now even the fireplace bench must know these stories by heart, but when there was someone new he always enjoyed telling them — "one day when he and I were between Campora and Leccetone, and in those days they were really forests, we found ourselves face to face with Ricciolo, as if out of nowhere, with his gun on his shoulder and dogs on leash. 'Ricciolo,' I said, 'don't you know that at Cerreta we don't fool around with bandits?' He broke open his shotgun and showed me the empty chambers. 'It's a day and a night that I've been following three boars. The dogs flushed them out at Montagnola, so they're not yours. I've tracked them through Marmoraia, they passed across the Rosia, and then into Cerreta. So I leashed the dogs. On Cerreta I won't shoot, but I said to myself that if I find Pasquale I'll ask his permission to pass.' The count, who was a good type, a born hunter, and I was too, you know, when I was younger, said, 'Come on Pasquale, let's go

with him.' We tracked all night across the Vallone; below Castiglioni we crossed the Merse, then crossed the Montorsao hills and on down to Pian di Feccia. At dawn we entered the brush of Luriano. A southwest wind was blowing so hard down those gullies you could hardly stand. We found ourselves in brush so high we couldn't see sky, when just in front of us all hell broke loose; there wasn't even time to shoulder a gun. With a crash like a herd of buffalo the boars ran through us, between our legs, blindly. The count tumbled, legs in air. Ricciolo and I fired point blank. One was killed; the others got away, with the dogs behind howling, obsessed. There was a trail of blood, and we found one, an old gray with yellow tusks, backed up to a tree, waiting. The dogs howled around him, without approaching. The count finished him with a bullet in the chest, but before he was entirely dead Ricciolo was on him with a knife long as your arm, and plunged it into his gut. He didn't twitch, just fell like a rock."

Arriving at the ancient chestnuts of Filicaie in a freezing fog, Gherardo was amazed to find there so many people that he had never seen before. They were squatting around a big bonfire of dry branches, hands extended toward the heat; with their dark, bearded faces the group had a furtive and savage look. On the other hand, even if he wasn't aware of it, he himself, descending the mule trail followed by the folk of Cerreta with the chaos of a dozen dogs running between their legs, had the dashing look of a brigand chief.

There were noisy yelps from the groups of leashed

dogs, trembling with anxiety and anticipation. "Here comes Montorsaio," said someone. Only their approaching shapes were visible in the thick fog. "There's the count too."

Count Geminiani came up the steep slope with an alacrity that belied his gray hair. Vigorously taking Gherardo's arm, he said:

"You'll see how we do a hunt; when there's a novice he always gets first crack at the boar." One couldn't fail to note the animation of his sharp features and the agility of his movements, nor the relaxed and distinguished bearing that his hunting clothes, no matter how careless he may have been about them, did not succeed in hiding. Gherardo had never seen him so lively, perhaps because here the count felt safe from the agricultural discussions Gherardo always involved him in. At the hunt, among dogs and hunters, he could give free rein to his natural good-naturedness, free from the burden of having to analyze problems that had not one but a hundred or a thousand solutions, depending on the diverse circumstances that make agricultural science so uncertain. Everyone gathered around him; there was no end of shaking hands; he called everyone by his nickname, with a joke or a knowing smile for each; you could see they were all good friends from birth. The familiar way that people treated the count, equal to equal except for their use of the formal pronoun *lei*, amazed Gherardo, who conceived a new respect for him, almost envy. That wasn't the way they dealt with him. He felt rather left



out, a bit foreign. And he noted that the count's accent had gotten even thicker than the woodsmen's, that he was emphasizing with conscious pleasure, to the point of exaggeration, the words and pronunciation of the country vernacular. Gherardo's own hint of a Florentine accent, by contrast, had always seemed to faintly irk Geminiani.

An automobile was heard approaching. Soon after, Fernando di Caprolato joined them, neat and precise as a statue amid those Maremma roughnecks. It seemed as if with every step in those woods he ought to ruin, lose his brand-new look. But Gherardo suspected that for some occult reason, despite the mud and the thorns, those creases that looked like they'd just come from the flat iron would never be harmed. He greeted Geminiani with a "Ciao, Gigi" and introduced himself to Gherardo, involving him in an inconsequential conversation that, to judge by Caprolato's continual laughing, he thought brilliant. He seemed to be trying to rush through the steps necessary to reach the level of close acquaintanceship required for the familiar *tu*. After the first conventional phrases he started to speak of himself, quickly offering the confidence that for him there were only two things that made life worth living, women and horses.

The guard Menciatti, to whom Gherardo by right of seniority had delegated the functions of master of the hunt, came to suggest: "If you agree, we could make one beat from up above here, on Poggio al Santo. That way if any more arrive they can be posi-

tioned here." Gherardo of course agreed. "Pasquale," ordered Menciatti, "go up with your dogs and the beaters. Would you rather man the road?"

"No, you go ahead and do it."

Followed by a dense group of people and dogs, Pasquale headed up for the Filicaie. The fog was beginning to burn off; some blue was showing and it was getting colder.

The fire was burning out; Gherardo hated to leave it. The low voice of Menciatti said, "The best spot is at the charcoal kiln clearing. Would you like to go there?"

"No, put Count Geminiani there."

The positions extended along the mule trail. They left a gun every forty or fifty paces; "You can only shoot in this direction; anywhere else and you're liable to hit someone. And quiet, no smoking. The beaters will come down the hill. Good luck."

Once in position, Gherardo felt himself taken with a growing trepidation, a sense of incapability, as in his youth when he was responsible for the first time for the success of some task. He felt rather alone, but at the same time glad that no one could see how he was comporting himself. The silence was disturbing. He could no longer hear voices or barking; from time to time, under the pressure of the north wind that had dissipated the fog and was still swaying the tops of the trees, the woods rustled as if with a cold shiver. His nervousness growing, he lit a cigarette, not without a certain concern that Menciatti, returning, would re-

spectfully make clear his mute disapproval. He tried to imagine hearing a boar hurtling down some path, putting gun to shoulder, aiming; they said that they were big beasts, more or less like a range pig; how could he possibly miss?

From the hill a bugle sounded; another sounded from the road, and on the ridge the din began. The beaters filled the brush with savage yells, beating on empty cans, batting sticks against trees. There was a lone gun shot and a brief furious howling of dogs; all was silent for a moment, then the din started again.

From above, first two, then three baying hounds; a high yelping from the throat of a lone dog as if to ask help, then furious rushing, barking from every part of the forest, the pack in pursuit, raging, crowding, over-running the slopes. Above all the noise Pasquale's voice, shouting, "Louder, beaters; louder, beaters!" The noise of the thumping and of the yells grew to a paroxysm.

Gherardo drew back to the side of the road, gun to shoulder, trying to concentrate his attention. Caprolato, who was his neighbor on the left, reminded him by gestures of the space where he was supposed to shoot and especially the area in his direction where he shouldn't shoot. In the other direction he could distinguish with difficulty, since he was up against the trunk of an oak, a Maremmano wrapped in a great old brown cloak, hat low over his eyes and gun in shooting position with the immobility of a fakir, deadly serious. The pack descended dizzily upon them. As if they had

an independent will of their own his hands clenched the gun, his chest tightened with rising anxiety. But the pack, just as it seemed about to reach them, stopped for an instant in the nearby undergrowth, and after a few angry howls, took off violently, disappearing up the hill.

Gherardo looked at his neighbors and saw that they were stretching their legs. Caprolato came toward him a few paces and said in a low voice, "They smelled us." Gherardo allowed himself a feeling of relief at being able to relax his attention.

The pack seemed to be running in a circle above the hunters without finding a way through, when suddenly, with a crashing of broken branches and bestial snorts from the bushes that froze his blood, from the scrub in front of him erupted a great gray snout, low to the ground, two small shiny black eyes, a mane of stiff bristles; and with a leap the animal jumped the road and disappeared into the woods below.

As if he were just then remembering he had the gun, Gherardo fired a shot behind the beast, where it had already passed. The Maremmano on his right was already into the woods on the trail of the boar. Then came the dogs, barking, jumping over each other and swarming in pursuit. In self-reproach, Gherardo felt humiliated, diminished. Replaying it in his mind, he could not tell if it had been a few seconds or a quarter hour. And looking at the point where it had popped out of the woods, he was amazed that the beast had then seemed so big, and now so small.

With his gun slung over his shoulder and a lit a cigarette, Caprolato came toward him; "A fair-sized animal. Around sixty kilos. It happens, to someone who has never seen one before, that close."

The pack had by now passed beyond the valley and had lost itself on the other side of the Ricausa, in the woods of the Ceppa. The men, the dog handlers, the beaters, were beginning to come out of the woods, soaked from the heavy dew. They related how the boar hadn't wanted to move until the men were almost on top of him; they asked who had shot. Told, they didn't comment, but their very silence was disapproval. Pasquale sounded his bugle and fired a couple of shots as a signal to call back the dogs, who could still be heard over toward Montorsaio. Meanwhile the hunters were congregating. Micheli assailed Gherardo with the usual stale jokes. Signora Flavia consoled him, "Don't worry, it happens to everyone, even those who think they're experts." She spoke with the patient tone of one who frequently has occasion to use her powers of tolerance.

At noon, when the hunt broke for lunch in front of Castiglioni, the game bag comprised a beautiful marten that Flavia Micheli couldn't resist stroking, and a cat, one of those thieving, ugly creatures that take to the woods and become feral.

Up under the ilex climbed the animals from the Fattoria, loaded with baskets and boxes. Behind, together with Anna and Cecco, came Corinna. With great surprise, she recognized a young fellow in a

group of hunters coming up from the valley, "Oh, Ranieri!" she exclaimed cheerfully, waving. Equally surprised, Ranieri Cennini ran to her. They each had to explain what they were doing there; having last seen each other in Rome at some brilliant gathering, they couldn't quite remember where, they had hardly imagined that they would meet again in this out-of-the-way forest. Both had belonged for some years to the same circle of carefree young people. But they didn't have time to renew their friendship; Corinna had to take care of the other guests, especially Count Geminiani who, with Sandro at his side, demanded her company for lunch.

In the clearing overlooking Castiglioni the hunters divided themselves into loosely defined groups. As in a legislative assembly, where from the group in the center various social nuances form links to the parties of the extreme, so also in this noisy gathering: from the families of the padroni, by grades of decreasing importance, one passed to country businessmen, superintendents and foremen, staff of the farm centers, peasants, descending finally to certain individuals whose status would be difficult to define, whose probable means of support was minor crime and livestock poaching, who survived as best they could with help from the meager resources of the woods and fields. There were also those who came and went with equal confidence from one group to another, like the doctor and the brigadier of Carabinieri of Pian di Feccia. "And Don Vanzetti?" asked Gherardo, surprised not

to see the priest, great hunter in the sight of God. "Oh, he doesn't come to the hunts; he goes on his own," answered Pasquale while slicing bread.

The doctor was the target of jokes; they accused him of responsibility for the isolated gunshot at the beginning of the hunt. As soon as the dogs had been loosed, the dog handlers had seen a fox climbing stealthily away from the hunt up the rough little hill on which Menciatti, persuaded that the boars would not go that way, had put the doctor. From the other slope the beaters saw the fox and all yelled, "Doctor, the fox! Look, doctor, a fox is coming up!" But from the top of his hill the doctor couldn't see it; some bushy thickets hid it from view. Halfway up the hill Count Geminiani had seen it from his adjacent post near the charcoal kiln clearing. Meantime the others were watching the animal slyly working her way around them, while the doctor kept looking in all directions but still saw nothing. Almost as if on purpose, in the moments when he could have fired at the fox, he was aiming intently in the opposite direction. Count Geminiani was suffering; those vulpine thieves of the forest are the most sought after, but from his post he ran the risk of hitting the doctor, who by now was so confused that he could no longer think straight. Finally when, just ten paces from the doctor, the fox was about to disappear into the bush, the count had shot anyway, in desperation and almost in revenge, making the bullet whistle by his neighbor.

A feeling of indolent ease descended on them.

Against the wall of the old castle, in the bright sun of full autumn, it was almost too hot. On the slope of the hill, between the black of the ilex and the evergreen of the arbutus, the brush was beginning to turn a rusty hue. Knowing that this was one of the year's last beautiful days made people indulgent toward themselves and others. Thus Micheli was not offended that Caprolato was full of attention for Signora Flavia; the evident pleasure that his wife took in the aging dandy's bold speech and familiar smiles didn't bother him to-day. Although braced for one of her husband's habitual outbursts, she was pleased with the old-fashioned but inoffensive gallantry, and preferred to run the risk. She had developed a habit, since so often it happened that a pleasant conversation was cut off by one of his sudden outbursts, of sneaking what little comfort she could, like a snail in a child's hand that puts out its horns, pulls them back at the child's touch, then after a moment tries again. But when Flavia, attracted by the lively conversation going on around Gherardo, changed groups and seemed to pay a more serious attention to the people there, Micheli pricked up his ears and hung close to them in evident bad humour, like a dog that whines at a stranger.

Ranieri Cennini was talking with Corinna about their Roman days, their common friends. Corinna felt herself unwillingly carried off by those remembrances of a life so far away in distance and in time. Friends who had married, little scandals that a few months ago would have avidly interested her, now appeared like

items in the paper, curiously impersonal. On the other hand it was with an inner smile that she noticed how Flavia Micheli was enchanted in observing the enthusiasm of Gherardo, who had finally succeeded in engaging Count Geminiani in discussion.

The count was gently berating Gherardo: "But, my dear Anguillesi, relax a little; you were an artist, a critic, and no amateur. Now you're acting like a businessman, one of those people who are always in a hurry, who want to stamp everything out with machines. Look around a little. Do you see anything new?" In fact the ruined walls of Castiglioni, the ancient ilexes that dominated it and the crown of brush-covered mountains were unchangeable and immemorial, on guard over the peaceful wilderness. "Just try to put here one of those modern buildings made of reinforced concrete, with a roof of that shiny material they use nowadays. Try to make an ilex grow before its time. Or try, with all the machines in the world at your disposal and money by the shovelful, to speed up by only one day the ripening of wheat, of grapes, of olives. The land shouldn't be treated with violence. I don't say that you can't bring some improvements to Cerreta, God knows they're needed, but you need to go slow and not against the current, otherwise you'll risk being carried away. Then you have to consider the local folk, the habits, the traditions. Change people? God willing that I'm wrong, but you'll be disillusioned. Besides I marvel that you, an artist, have such a wish to do away with these old-fashioned ideas up here. Do

the new ways appear so much better to you?"

Gherardo tried to explain himself, to clearly understand his own motives. "What do you want? It's stronger than I am; when I see things badly done, negligence, inertia, inhibiting the will to get things done, I just can't stand it. Then . . . you've seen those dank caves under the tower, here behind Castiglioni? Two women were living in there. Miserable, abandoned . . . don't you think that if their lot is improved, the rest of the people could be won over also?"

"You need to be careful," said Geminiani. "Don't assume that you benefit people by giving them new needs. That stranger comes to mind that bought Suvereta, do you know him? It's a wild place, poetic in a way, down past Campagnatico, toward the Maremma. There's a big castle in the woods, a bit like here at Castiglioni, but habitable. He fell in love with it and bought it from my uncle Arvelleschi, even paying quite a good price for those days. He established himself there, with his wife. They had an irrational fear about hygiene; they wanted to make all the woodsmen take baths, imagine? They brought in so many new machines, all wonderful innovations: after a year they were a mountain of rusty iron. Then they got it into their heads to make moral propaganda. They assembled everyone, catechized them: morality, honesty, and then a certain thing they called "efficiency," and went on and on about this efficiency in work, in life, in morality. was up there three years later at my uncle's place when he came to beg him to take everything

back, and I tried to tell him my opinion. Cleanliness, yes, but in their way they are just as clean as we are; they live always outdoors, in the air, in the sun; the houses, the beds are of the poor, but if you go to see, they're always clean; with the work they do from morning to night they have little need of hygiene. As to honesty, honesty is a different thing for those who have nothing than for those who have everything; it's a question of point of view. And it's better not to talk about morality to people who are used to keeping score on all of us. It's a natural life; you need to go slowly with improvements; it's easy to make things worse."

"Then you think there's nothing to be done?"

"I don't say that; I say go slowly. I'm suspicious of novelties. When you think it over carefully, do the people up here seem worse to you than those in the city?"

Micheli laughed, a coarse laugh, shaking his head in derision: "Artist!"

Gherardo laughed too. "Some more some less, we all have a bit of the artist in our blood."

"I must really have very little," answered Micheli philosophically; a clear laugh from Flavia echoed him, and she turned her face to Gherardo with a knowing grin.

The really passionate hunters had a quite a task to rouse the others from their lunchtime lethargy. Corinna took up her post with Count Geminiani, above Castiglioni, almost at the top of the hill of Siena

Vecchia, from which the confluence of the valleys of the Ricaua and the Merse were visible. It was nearing the shortest day of the year, and the bottom of the valley was beginning to lose itself in a light violet mist. Up there nothing was growing but some low heather and the occasional volunteer chestnut, the last stunted offspring of the great chestnut grove of the Riovivo that petered out on the barren rocks of the ridge. In the first hint of twilight it was already cool; she and Sandro wrapped themselves in the cape that the Count, stationing himself a bit further on, had thrown on the ground. To both fit they had to squeeze together; Corinna felt the thin legs of the boy against her, quiet, unmoving.

The Count made a sign to be quiet and to listen; from time to time they heard some faint barking that rose from the valley. But they had nearly forgotten that they were hunting. They were so comfortable, in that warmth of their combined bodies, in that great peace of late afternoon. Suddenly, as if it had crossed over a ridge below, there was the furious baying of a pack of dogs. Before they could get up a great boar jumped out of the heather. Seeing them it turned quickly. But the Count had shot; the animal fell heavily. At the same moment the pack of dogs burst on the scene and swarmed over it. Sandro and Count Geminiani ran into the tangle of dogs and boar, but couldn't shoot for fear of wounding the dogs. The beast raised itself, disentangling its great gray head, backed against a boulder and then charged the dogs. A

high yelp was heard. In the space that opened around the expiring boar the Count and Sandro shot, simultaneously. The beast collapsed like a log. But a great white dog remained there it had been tossed by the boar, whining piteously, in torment. Corinna, trembling, approached it. From the ripped-open belly of the poor beast came a tangle of bloody entrails. She looked at him, with his shocked and pitiable eyes, and he seemed to want to drag himself to her, as if, more than to ask for help, to give her one last sign of devotion. It was old Guerrino, her first friend at Cerreta, who had to die so, on the ground, having fought the good fight.

But here came Pasquale, popping out from as if for nowhere, shouting at the Count unceremoniously to hold the dog by the legs while he pushed that bloody bundle back inside; then with a great needle that he must carry for such events, he proceeded to sew up the wound with big stitches. Caught between the impulse to sob like a lunatic and an hysterical urge to laugh, Corinna couldn't take her horrified eyes from the operation. When he had finished, Pasquale, checking his work, said:

"Poor Guerrino, who knows if you'll make it. You're old for this."

Through the heath the dogs and the beaters came running, in a frenzy, yelling. In their midst Bello waved a big stick as if commanding an assault, emitting shrill piercing shouts. Corinna felt herself shiver from both repulsion and excitement; it was like a savage rite that

ought to end in an orgy or a brutal sacrifice.

And then they fell on the still warm boar to feel him, to guess his weight, to tear out some bristles. He was a huge male, gray with age, with great yellow worn tusks. Then they lifted him, hung him from poles and four at a time they carried him, in triumph, with the great hairy head dangling.

Behind them everyone descended by a narrow stony path through the cold dark woods.

XIII

Coming back up from the Camponi fields, Teresa had passed a man sitting on a block of stone, but at first paid no attention. "Probably one of those vagabonds that come to scrounge a piece of bread," she thought, and had kept right on going with her habitual tired pace, like that of the oxen. She tried to ignore him: "They're always worthless people." But he had risen and wished her a good evening. At that voice Teresa stopped; a painful resonance vibrated in her. The man didn't have the look of those hobos who stopped by houses in the evening to ask for a place to sleep in the haymow or in the stable; his clothes had a different cut, something foreign. Warned by that trembling in her heart that was building to the point of making her breathing difficult, her memory found the thread and suddenly she recognized him.

She couldn't speak. She felt weak, as if her blood had suddenly turned to water. All she could do was look at him, with eyes in which there was a growing confusion, a fog in which she felt she was drowning. Nor did he move, as if, facing the depth of that look, he was overcome with a sense of fear, of respect. But he recovered quickly.

"Teresa," he said, she still transfixed, "don't you see how down and out I am?"

Since they had moved to Sant'Ansano and begun to get their life organized, in a well-being that she had never hoped for, Teresa had always feared that some unexpected occurrence would ruin everything and put them back in the misery that seemed to be their lot in the world. She was afraid to admit that they were better off, afraid to hope they could stay that way. It seemed to her that she could not hold off the destiny that for so long had raged against them, and that if, for the moment, things had calmed down, even more trouble must be coming. To be ready, to foresee every misfortune, made her feel as if she had already parried the upcoming blows; almost to ward them off, by being resigned to them. She had thought of everything: illness, problems with the animals, even for some reason that she couldn't imagine to lose the good will of the padrone; even the signores have their whims.

The disgrace of Virginia had not shaken her, though she had worried about Amedeo finding out: with that closed character, one never knew what to expect of him. It was a consolation that at least it wouldn't have to happen at Castiglioni. Now there would be a birth, a new little innocent creature to love. But this, the return of Anselmo, she had never anticipated. It was her fault; she should have known where the trouble would come from. But, like beasts of burden that accept a load greater than their capacity, that bend but keep trying, she gave in and made peace with

this new affliction.

Meanwhile he was telling his story: he embellished, romanticised, but always in a way that one could recognize the reality behind those ornamentations with which he extemporaneously enriched the tale. He was self-pitying almost to the point of being in tears, and now was congratulating himself on that life purified by his imagination. A sense of moral well-being warmed him: "Look at the condition to which I've been reduced! Look at my shoes! I've suffered such hunger, Teresa!" But he didn't talk about thirst, of the terrible thirst that was his torment and pleasure.

"At first I was ashamed; I didn't dare contact you. Not that I didn't think of it, I always had you in mind; and I knew that you would pardon me." He gave her a quick glance to see what impression that word 'pardon' had made, thrown out so boldly, but Teresa was stone faced, staring at him without expression. "Then came the crisis; I no longer had a home. I worked at every kind of job, traveled half the world. But I always knew that until I returned here there would be no peace for me. I worked for months breaking rocks on the Siena road. I worked all around hereabouts without having the courage to be seen back here."

No thought of what they might have suffered, the hunger, the cold, the fear, down there in the gullies of Castiglioni. All the time they were down there he had never shown up. But now he must have heard from some cart-driver — who knows what he was really doing on the highway — that at Sant'Ansano they had

fixed up a little farm and that it was occupied by that woman, Teresa of Brenna, who had been at Castigli-
oni, the castle that only God knows.

And as soon as he had understood that there was something to be had, here he was ready to snatch the food from their mouths. Where would he get the energy to work in the fields? Who knows what sort of work he had done, in what mud he had rolled, that wasted body, those disgraced hands?

But he was smiling. Surely they wouldn't send him away. On his red-blotched face the smile was an unexpected ugliness. Now that she saw him better she was amazed that she had recognized him; her memory didn't recall any image of him from the past. Only the sound of his voice was familiar.

Down the slope of the chestnut grove, in the dusk, the old woman was descending, bent under an enormous bundle of dry branches. At the sound of an unfamiliar voice she stopped and raised her face from under the load. Anselmo looked at her with vacant surprise, then smiled. "Oh mamma," he said, "is it you? Ah, what a consolation to return to the breast of the family, to no longer feel lost in the world!" And real tears ran down his purple cheekbones and white cheeks.

The old woman had put her burden on the ground, leaned against it with her knees as if to recover from a shock, and looked at him unseeingly.

XIV

Sandro and Count Geminiani came to say goodbye: School was starting; they were heading to Rome. Gherardo was considering buying a tractor to speed up the work of seeding that never seemed to end; he talked it over with the count. The expense would be difficult to manage, but when it came to the purchase of agricultural machinery, the bank was disposed to an increase in his line of credit.

"How have you managed to finish plowing so early?" he asked the count. "It looks to me like a lot of land in Cerreta will have to lie fallow this year." Sandro and Corinna went off up the mule trail that led from the gates to the chestnut grove above, then entered the forest of the Leccetone and Poggio al Santo.

It was the first hour of afternoon and the weather was clear without a sign of clouds, but the air already had the feeling of dusk. Entering the shade of the valley one would be enveloped in cold, while just beyond an opposite slope would still be warm from the noon-day sun. Up high, where the path divides to lead down to Sant'Ansano, they found Teresa and Virginia collecting chestnuts. Bent to the reddish earth, they were picking up those already out of their husks, shuffling

their shoes on the still closed shells to make them release their shining fruit.

Teresa showed them a handful:

"They're the first, they're still small. And this year there are few; they've suffered from the drought." Then she opened a cloth-wrapped packet.

"I'll bring these up to the Fattoria for you, if you'd like."

They were mushrooms. One had to touch them and handle them with delicacy, like something precious. There were big old porcinis with grave, grotesque expressions like dwarfs wrinkled with age; there were young ones, hard, robust, all head, with stems still wrapped in white skin like swaddling; there were thick ditole, full of holes, reminiscent of those spongy rocks that one puts in gardens; and bright red ovules, flaming, beautiful.

"When these come out, it means they are the last, signora padrona." The sense of the waning season fell on them. The good days were ending.

Arriving at the crest they went down into the valley. And for the first time, as if it had happened all at once, they realized that the woods were changing, taking on the colors of autumn.

Great swaths of turkey oak yellowed the entire hill that, in dropping to the valley, lit up even more with blue ash, or paled with the bare hornbeam, diaphanous as a cloud. Already in the chestnut grove on the other bank of the Ricausa, above Camporedalda, contorted shapes of trunks and branches appeared among the

thinning foliage. The thickets of evergreens, ilex, and tamarisk seemed dreary by comparison, so dark among all that blaze of color. And here was a leafy rowan, graceful, mottled with a delicate rose, there a patch of wild chestnut raised a wisp of gray against the mass of deep green. In the boggy places, at the tops of the long trunks of the white poplars, the last leaves, soon to fall, shimmered with a whole range of delicate, sensual colors.

The path penetrated deeply into the thicket, an old thicket with an undergrowth of heather as high as saplings and ancient broom that competed with the turkey oaks. Farther along they heard the dry measured blows of pennatos, the woodsman's curved machete. Shortly they came out into a opening where three men were working, clearing. Corinna asked, surprised:

"I think the padrone doesn't want to cut these woods."

An old man in his sixties explained: "Some half-cut areas remained from the time of the Corporation; the padrone is having us finish the job. Also, clearing this way does nothing but good; the best plants are left to grow into seed trees. Where there's high canopy, we thin the lower branches, remove the dead limbs, clean away the ivy and the mistletoe, and the forest is left like a garden. Look."

The cut area was in fact beautiful; the remaining trees, young but robust, freed from the tangle of vegetation that had been suffocating them in the thicket,

had quickly begun to thrive. The men had stopped working; leaning on the handles of their axes or renewing the cutting edge on one of their tools with a stone, they watched them. There was another, older man, gaunt, weathered like an ancient beard of ilex, and a small, thin one, about thirty.

"This is my father," said the first old man, "and that one's my son."

At the edge of the clearing two great oaks raised their rust-colored crowns above the small population of younger trees. In the middle there was a hut. Seeing that they were looking at the beautiful tall trees, the oldest spoke:

"Before the Corporation, the forests of Cerreta all looked like that. Countess Adelaide, God bless her, had a passion for them. She would come on horseback, by herself, and would mark the trees to be cut. And watch out, better do it right! But it was a satisfaction for us who did the work. She would consult with us, would have us prune the crowns on the better trees to create the high canopy, and she would stay there to watch. And then there were the nut groves. There was no end of acorns for pasture in those days."

Suddenly he recognized Sandro: "Oh look, if it's not the young Count of Montorsai. Excuse me; I should have recognized you immediately, you're just like the count when he was young. But look at you, you've grown up. And so quickly, a handsome young man! And how's the count? Does he still hunt? Sure, at your age you're interested in more than the hunt!" he said,

creasing his wrinkled face in a knowing grin.

The old man continued: "Count Ulderigo, to give him credit, always respected the forest. It took the Corporation to commit this massacre. And then to go bankrupt! He at least came to hunt and nothing more. He did no harm. Ah, those were the good times. In the evening, with all the signori of Siena at the villa, they would bet their fortunes. One night he bet the entire estate on one card, with a Duke from Rome. But he had other good properties, in the lowlands. Up here it's always been rough going. These are poor places, but beautiful, nevertheless."

The others picked up their axes and pennatos.

"Pop, once you get started you never stop talking. It's late, let's get going."

Corinna went to look inside the hut; under the sod roof the wood framework was so perfectly interwoven it looked like the basketwork that certain mountain people do with willow and twigs. Inside there were four simple bunks. Sandro entered also; the talkative old man continued to explain: "We spend the winter in here."

The idea of their being stuck here for a whole winter was not at all horrifying, since the hut was so tidy and clean; to Corinna it seemed that she wouldn't mind living thus for a season, a beautiful spring, right there in the forest, without ever having to deal with people. And also the work, clearing the brush, cutting wood, working around the trees, would be clean and enjoyable.

"First we erect a skeleton of boughs and make the ribs out of chestnut saplings. Then we make this latticework of heather tied with vines and covered with a layer of sod. Bad weather doesn't bother us. It's not at all bad." The door and the window were also made of trellises of branches, tied to the hut with pieces of vine.

"Good evening to you both, signori," the others called as they took off down the dark path. The old man, in the darkness of the hut, turned his wrinkled and toothless face to them with a sly grin. The light that entered the opening of his shirt sculpted the thin hairy chest with the relief of his bony ribs.

"But for two young people like you there are even better ways to keep warm."

They heard a laugh, down the hill; and someone said: "Grandpa always has to have his little joke!"

And after a while they too went along their way.

XV

After All Saints Day the weather changed for the worse. October had been delightful: they would open the blinds in the morning with the certainty of finding in the first rosiness of dawn a sky blue without a single cloud, just as they had left it the night before in an ocean of moonlight. On the forms of the trees, on the profiles of the hills, the sun every day painted its coppery tint a little later. The valleys were filled with morning fog that little by little rose and dissipated.

The neighbors had all left to winter in the city. Feeling themselves alone in a vast emptiness, Gherardo and Corinna came closer again, as after a separation. In both was an awareness that something had changed between them, without knowing why or even exactly what. Corinna had begun to rise early and go out on horseback with him to inspect the work. Usually Ruggero the foreman went as well; Corinna got along well with him.

Ruggero respectfully observed that at Montorsaio they had almost finished planting the winter wheat, while at Cerreta, because they had been using the oxen to haul building material, they hadn't even started. If it



began to rain, as was expected any day now, they would have great difficulty planting in the heavy soil.

"Up here it's not like on the plain. Book knowledge is all very well, but you need practical experience; and especially an understanding of your fields."

The land itself seemed to oppose Gherardo's plans. It was as if between its hedges, lazy and unwilling, it didn't want the slow rhythmic cadence of its life disturbed. And as if the men understood this as well.

When called to the farm center for labor or for transport, the peasants were interested in the day's pay they received and nothing else; "It can't get any worse," they seemed to say. Gherardo couldn't comprehend such laziness, how they could neglect everyday matters, even sowing, as if the benefits would be only for the padrone. He had hoped, when the sowing started, to show active leadership, so that they would be encouraged to follow his lead, but he could see that with their attitude the planting would be slow and inefficient. Seeing the slow ox carts on the roads loaded with stone or brick, with the peasants lying half-asleep on their sacks, he was beginning to think that slowness was an ancient trait of the race that resisted any effort to overcome it, as if, through the experience of their ancestors who had tried and been discouraged so often, they had sucked it in with their mothers' milk. They accepted the misery, the hunger, rather than force themselves to react.

The long discussions in which Mastiani showed off his erudition and ingenuity, lovely to listen to but a to-

tal waste of time, were beginning to annoy him. So many elegant projects were espoused, but nothing came of them. He began to realize why Mastiani had not stayed long in one position; with all his knowledge, he was incapable of doing, of directing, of commanding.

When he talked to a peasant, he would drown him in long and difficult words, would convince him that he was an ignoramus, would affirm once again his own infinite superiority, and leave him with a satisfied smile and a shrug of the shoulders: "To wash the heads of asses. . . ." The peasant would be dazed by a torrent of information that slid off his back like water over a smooth stone.

Finally, when he could no longer suffer the agony of seeing the unplowed earth, Gherardo screwed up his courage and went to Siena, made a deal with the bank, and bought a tractor.

The trials with the machine reawoke his earlier hopes. It was a light tractor, made for hills: it would climb up the slopes like a strange, incredible pachyderm, slicing open and deeply turning the earth. Gherardo couldn't get enough of following behind it step by step, with infantile pleasure, a child with a new toy. In that overwhelming mechanical force that tore out roots and turned up earth that had never before seen the light of day, he felt that he had found his long-sought ally; his difficulties now seemed to be nearly overcome. He had hired as the driver a youth named Petrini who had been working in a blacksmith shop in

Rosia, a little strange but pleasant, who claimed to know how to do everything. In the winter, when he was not driving the tractor, he could work as a carpenter and blacksmith. At the Fattoria there were always things to repair or overhaul; at Cerreta there was a lot of lost time to make up for. This fit with Gherardo's great program of doing everything for themselves at Cerreta, which gave him a special satisfaction. Petrini was married, with a wife like a little sparrow, whose hesitant smile aroused compassion.

Ruggero warned that he was a no-account and a drinker. But Gherardo had been won over by the lad's enthusiastic and engaging style and his great desire to work. So he assigned the machine to him.

Cerreta's farm machinery, in addition to some rusty plows, included a rickety threshing machine, a little old truck from which the kids who played in the Fattoria's piazza had taken all the screws, bolts, and easily removable parts, and a mowing machine that lacked half its teeth. When found, these machines had been stored under a ramshackle roof where it rained inside as hard as outside. Gherardo had them repaired and put in a big shed in the woods that once had served as an animal shelter. With a caution that he had invested time and money in them, he turned them over to Petrini, with solemnity and the warning that, "If we want to work with a profit, the tools have to be kept in shape."

Corinna also enjoyed watching the tractor at work: she wasn't interested in Cerreta's agricultural prob-

lems, but in the novelty. For her Cerreta was an immense, marvelous park. With Sandro she had learned to love the forest; the forest had the same effect on her as did the sea, slowing down mind and energy, and allowing contemplation, so essential to her life. She didn't enter into the battles Gherardo was so deeply involved in; battles against whom? At times he appeared to be fighting against the natural ways of men and of things. Corinna remained untouched by that passion.

Often they would leave the house together, then separate as soon as Gherardo stopped to talk to a peasant or to the workers on a job. She preferred to go wandering in the woods. In the house, the solitude was becoming oppressive: in the too large rooms, cold, badly lit, she felt she would die of boredom. But they had to return to the house early; every day darkness fell a little earlier. After a cup of tea, Gherardo would impatiently hurry down to the office; he had a lot to do. Sometimes, though he would never let on to Corinna, he would instead end up in front of the hearth at the Fattoria, where in the dark, he'd listen in on the long, lazy conversations between the guards. They were recollections that in the retelling took on a significance that surely the original events had not had. He always learned something by listening to them though; often from these conversations some peasant's infraction would come to light that they thought the padrone already knew about but that to him was a revelation. Sometimes an intractable problem would

be clarified in precise, simple terms, as a result of a word accidentally dropped by them. He would calm the twinge of shame he felt for leaving Corinna alone; this was an essential part of his work.

Staying down in the office was less enjoyable, and perhaps less profitable. In the books that Mastiani maintained in admirable form it emerged crystal clear that everything was organized magnificently. The administrative system was a marvel; the subtleties, the accounting terms were so involuted, so ingenious and elegant, that they gave a sense of perfect peace, like superb architecture. Between the debits and the credits there was a perfect equilibrium, so that every entry generated its counterpart in the opposite column. On paper it was beautiful, satisfying; but in fact there were always expenses, expenses; the harvests, the income, disappeared quickly.

Every day it appeared more clearly that the whole business had been launched too impetuously. He had wanted to move too fast. For now, he was resigned to putting off payments to the year's end, but no matter how much he avoided looking facts in the face, he couldn't hide the difficulties that were looming. He should have interrupted the renovations, slowed down at least; but how was that possible if one only had to look around to see that everywhere there were urgent, unpostponable necessities. He just had to have faith and keep moving. Sooner or later the day had to come when all the work would begin to pay off.

He had drawn up a master plan on a big sheet of

paper, displayed on the wall as a constant reminder to Mastiani, who treated it as a big joke. He would look over the schedule of planting, plowing, the list of roads, dikes, walls, ditches, and terraces with a smug smile, as if to say that in ten years they would still be discussing them. Everything went so slowly; it seemed that men and things conspired together against progress. For example, Mastiani would repeatedly assign laborers the job of ditching a slope to control runoff of water from the woods that was cutting tortuous gullies, ever deeper and wider, exposing the bedrock and leaving behind only pebbles and gravel. A few days later when he returned to inspect, more often than not the work would not yet have been started. He would return furious, boiling, to the Fattoria: "Why weren't the orders followed?"

Well, it had rained, or other events had caused delay; there was never a lack of good excuses. Gherardo would then personally take the men to the job site to see the work started, while Mastiani would shake his head smiling, like an elder who consents to a youngster's irrational caprices and indulges his whims.

A strange man, Mastiani. Sometimes he appeared to do such things on purpose, to enjoy putting a stick in the spokes, through a spirit of contradiction or to make his superiority felt, to demonstrate to Gherardo that, *padrone* or not, things couldn't be done his way. And he always had an apparently valid reason; he was a well of scientific know-how.

The rains started. The valleys were closed in by

heavy fog from which, like islands, the dark tops of the hills rose, crowned with the skeletons of the leafless chestnuts. Turning toward home Corinna's thoughts grew sad. It was cruel to be cooped up for entire days in those big cold, gloomy rooms, rooms that still seemed strange, that seemed to not want to become really hers. Corinna hadn't foreseen the loneliness. She quickly tired of reading, and she was not musician enough to be dedicated to the piano; besides, the instrument that adorned the salon, though beautiful to look at, had the metallic tone of an untuned harpsichord and gave her no pleasure to play. She shouldn't have to face such a brusque change from her previous life, without even a transition period.

Gherardo was concerned over how she would handle the winter. The thought of sending her to the city, to her own people, perhaps for a stay of several months, such a simple solution, made him uneasy. He wondered why. He really should do it. But when he discussed it with Corinna he learned, with surprise mixed with a vague contentment, that she was not as receptive to the idea as he had expected. Returning from a visit to the forest to see how the cutting was going, they dropped in at Tonni, the home of the priest, for a drink of water. Don Vanzetti was out, but a humble and frightened little woman asked if she could serve them something, sat them before the fireplace, and threw some wood on the fire. With the flame flaring up, the room, yellow with soot, with that bent little woman coming and going from cupboard to

table, took on a sinister aspect. On the wall were a shotgun and various bird traps and hunting hardware. Raising her eyes, Corinna found herself looking into the fixed stare of a great live owl on the mantelpiece, who raised and lowered its big grotesque head into the soft feathers of its neck.

Not even the arrival of Don Vanzetti, with his loud and somewhat forced good humor, had succeeded in dissipating the sad, almost dismal, feeling that had settled on them and had ended by affecting the priest also, who, sipping from his little glass of vinSanto, did his best to enliven the occasion: "Enjoy it, Signora Corinna, it won't do you any harm; it's genuine, made from crushed grapes and nothing more. . . ."

"Ah," he concluded with a sigh, accompanying them to the door after having discussed the local people with Gherardo, "you know, she takes everything a little too seriously"

Maybe that was right; don't take things too seriously. Return to the city, as before; take up the old life, with old friends, enjoy herself

A few days earlier, Gherardo had gone down one morning to Sant'Ansano. That was the only project that really had been carried to conclusion. It was probably for this reason that he went there with pleasure, as well as his old sympathy for Teresa of Castiglioni; he wanted to experience something that would reawaken his faith.

Having passed the flat fields of the Piano, he took a path that entered into Leccetone, sometimes led and

sometimes followed by the Spinone puppy Count Geminiani had sent as a gift to Corinna. At Le Rocche, a travertine outcropping that from the valley seemed like defensive walls, he didn't stop as usual to chat with the Zanis, who cut the stone; he wasn't in the mood for their monotonous talk that at other times had given him a sense of profound serenity, while the mind on its own wove the singsong of their words together with his thoughts.

At the chestnut grove he dropped straight down toward the roofs of Sant'Ansano. The pup that had gone festively ahead came back up whimpering. At the spring, on the grassy piazza of Sant'Ansano, a stranger, sitting on a chair in the sun reading the paper looked him over: "Can't you manage to keep your dog on a leash? It's no joke for someone who doesn't know it. And besides rabies is going around."

Out of character, the dog was growling. In his continual contacts with the peasants, Gherardo had learned to curb what once might have been an aggressive response. More than anything he was curious about this man who seemed more at home than he himself. Below a faded felt hat worn pushed back arrogantly, eyelashes frowned on the white of yellowed blood-spotted eyes with pale irises. The pallid lips were curled in a grimace of contempt. Although thin, even gaunt, he was strangely potbellied. His threadbare clothing, patched here and there, conserved a certain air of vulgar elegance, exaggerated almost to the ridiculous. The shoes were full of holes, the soles loose

from the uppers of shiny leather that, lacking buttons, were open to the ankles like the sandals in an ancient opera.

The man returned the examination. For some time now Gherardo had quit the refinement in dress that had been part of his first enthusiasm. His corduroy clothes were getting old, and through long wear his cowhide boots had taken on a dark patina that he rather liked, though they were old and worn.

"Are you from around here?" the man finally asked.

"No."

"I thought not. In my time you weren't here." It was clear that Gherardo was not to his liking. "A lousy, uncivilized place. I, who was born here, am ashamed to be here." He stroked a moustache yellowed by cigarettes and straightened the threadbare scarf that encircled his neck under the jacket. "I'm going to the city. I've just returned from France; I came to see that poor woman my wife and these kids," he said nodding toward Sant'Ansano.

Gherardo sat on the wall. Slowly he was remembering the story of Teresa, of the husband who had run away with a woman, of whom they hadn't heard anything more. This man must have taken him for a guard.

"Have you been here long? What sort of man is this padrone nowadays? They say he's going to ruin himself with construction projects. Great! I was here in the time of the Count. That one, he was a man; knew how to live, he did. What does this one do with

his money, bury it? Or if he tries to dig it up again, will he find it? At least the last one enjoyed his money."

One could see he was enjoying himself.

"It's always the same story; he who has it, doesn't know how to spend it, and he who would know how to put it to good use has none. Have you ever been to Marseilles?" At a shake of the head he continued, growing more superior: "It would drive people here crazy. First of all, no padroni. You work, you don't know who for, for some company or God knows what; Saturday you pick up your pay and you're on your way. In the evening you go out, everyone's equal: no reverence, no hat in hand. You can enjoy yourself." He gave a questioning look at Gherardo, who was looking at the ground. "Then, when you get to know the ropes, you no longer have to knock yourself out. First, you know, you have to pay your dues; then you make the new fellows coming up pay. I, I don't say it to brag, but I've always had a hand with the women. . . ." Without rising from his chair, where he had been sitting backward, he hopped it toward the wall; who knows what confidences would have come out if Gherardo had not risen.

The frigid sun of November penetrated into the bottom of the valley through a line of ilexes, outlining them one by one in gold.

Gherardo started toward the house. Squeezing together trying to pass all at once, the sheep were coming out of their pen. Behind them the old woman was herding them up toward the chestnuts with a staff of

ash. She passed in front of them without giving a sign that she had seen them. Teresa was in the stall watering a cow. Beneath the animal a calf, spreading his long knobby legs beyond reason as he bent low to reach her full udder.

"Didn't you know the cow had calved? Ugly old animal that she is, she had a beautiful calf." Caressing the animal, Teresa was smiling. Then there was a silence between them; one of those silences that communicates what can't be said with words. Teresa seemed relieved.

"You've seen that my man came back."

"I just met him."

Gherardo called the pup, who had been romping around the calf. The cow at the feeding-trough mooed, trying to turn herself. Without passing back through the courtyard, Gherardo returned on the path of Le Rocche. He was tired. He felt with bitterness the uselessness of keeping working, of trying to do good, to put things in order, to bring justice; in short, to live.

PART TWO

XVI

Great animation at the Giugnoli home in Rome. Corinna found the house infested with bristly beards and overabundant hair; her sister Franca had recently developed a weakness for artists, and intellectuals in general. They were all the rage: society people were relegated to second class, and while her mother was hastily studying this new culture in order to protect herself from possible embarrassment and save appearances, her father the colonel moved so awkwardly in the new milieu that Corinna was simultaneously amused and moved to pity. He seemed to have lost his sense of direction. More and more frequently, as the high-minded discussions reached full swing, she would take him by the arm and lead him outside, where they would wander the streets, stopping in some little-frequented spot where he could see in the mirrors that with his height and his old soldier's excellent posture he still cut a fine figure. They made an unusually handsome couple.

She felt, however, a strange sensation of fear on contact with society in general. She couldn't find her balance; she had the feeling of returning from a long voyage, a guilty flight that had changed her for the worse. When she happened to bump into an old acquaintance, after the usual easy, superficial enthusiasm she would feel a cloak of embarrassment fall around her and paralyze her old ability to make herself pleasant company.

She was incapable of taking part in small talk, and the usual commonplaces of courtesy were difficult. It was like relearning a language she had not used for a long time. She was surprised that people could talk so much and say so little. And this business of always finding herself among people who she knew too well, who had already said everything that they had to say, appeared to her so useless, so empty, that she was glad to note that after all there were some things that hadn't changed: the eternal desire of the men, the shrewdness and vanity of the women. With a strange and somewhat sad certainty Corinna felt that for her all this was finished. And not entirely because of Gherardo; it was also the end of an epoch. It was not that her generation had changed; it was that she no longer had any interests in common with them. She felt simultaneously more mature but younger.

With the younger people it was even worse. The young girls who were growing up now, she found, still had the instinctive curiosity, worries, and desires that had so agitated her, that had appeared so important to

her in those years that she had once considered the most beautiful of her life. She now looked back on their emptiness with a bitterness that was neither regret nor envy, like a child who has broken open her doll and finds that inside there's nothing but stuffing. The energy they expended to shine, to attract, to stand out, now seemed to her strange, incredible, all that effort, for what? She felt poorer than they, however, as if she had nothing to fill the void of those lost pressures; it really seemed that Gherardo was not enough. Gherardo had his own full life; he was a serious man, he had his work, and at that moment he had his worries.

She would have gladly been left alone, by herself, but her family wouldn't have it; her mother and sister were full of lively ideas. It was only her father who appeared to understand her and to enter into her way of feeling. But he had never been a guiding force in the family, and tended to follow the strongest currents. Besides what could she have done alone, day by day, hour by hour? And at Cerreta, what would she have done?

One evening in the ballroom of a great hotel, full of crystal and palms and flowers like a greenhouse, she encountered Ranieri Cennini. A few months had passed since the hunt at Cerreta; it seemed years, ages. She didn't recognize him immediately, and on seeing him advance across the dance floor toward her from a group of gentlemen — stylized uniforms, classical profiles, courteous and superior manners — that tall ,

elegant young man, she felt a sense of fear, as if she were under attack. He was thinner and faded. Her mind couldn't make the strange leap from the forests of Cerreta to that room, to these refined, elegant gentlemen; rather, with a sense of blame, her mind leaped back to earlier times, when she had known him as a young girl. But when he stopped before her she couldn't help assessing, a bit like one judges a horse or a woman, as she had at Cerreta, how handsome he was,.

Feeling himself flattered by the looks of his friends who watched him attentively, like eager hounds ready to be unleashed, discovering admiration revealed in Corinna's smile, the young man employed his charms to the utmost. And after the first steps of the dance, Corinna forgot being in the arms of a man, was unaware of the pressure of a hand on her waist, the pressure of chest against breast. Their bodies moved so harmoniously, so naturally with the rhythm, they seemed to merge in an ethereal union: every adversity, every perversity disappeared: a gentle ecstasy pervaded them, united them; they bent to the rhythm of the dance with the naturalness of reeds that yield to the air, to the water. Among the palms and the azaleas in flower, among the tables crowded around them, in the hubbub of conversations muffled by the music that softly rose from a mass of green, they felt isolated and in some strange way hidden; Corinna was no longer aware of those around her. But the others couldn't help watching them, couldn't help feeling the joy that

rose from them as if from some ritual of purification, a primitive ecstasy, almost religious. The two didn't speak; they couldn't speak. There ran between them one of those unconscious and profound understandings that shun words, almost a creative inspiration. But those watching could not have believed, without entering into their state of grace and becoming aware of a more profound way of feeling, that their deep and concrete understanding was fading away with a last chord, abstract and impersonal as music, like the echo of a poem. When they separated, Ranieri and Corinna knew that they had no further reason to see each other.

It seemed that the city had lost its appeal: everything was detached, impersonal; in the end it was good for her, a liberating feeling, as after a convalescence. Still, a sense of unreality pursued her, as if she wasn't entering into the substance of things, just the surface. Franca's intellectual get-togethers were painful. It seemed to her that these people didn't live, that they were playing at seeing themselves live.

One day, when a young poet was reading his verses with great emphasis, Corinna was isolated in a corner, protected by a curtain of people, where she could only hear his voice as a faraway accompaniment to her thoughts. A man no longer young sat near her, and after having looked at her perhaps longer than good manners would have permitted, asked her with a serene and unassuming courtesy, "And what do you think?," with a faint witty smile of complicity. The

grizzled beard framed a pallid face with curved, sensual lips, light albino eyes, and delicate, sensitive nostrils. Corinna couldn't avoid a response: "I wouldn't know; I was distracted. Besides, I'm not competent to judge."

"Tell the truth, they all seem crazy."

"Up to a point, perhaps. But I come from the country, so I may be biased. That is, it appears to me impossible that they're serious."

"Oh, finally, someone who understands . . ."

"No, no. I can't claim to understand poetry. . . . But look, perhaps it's because of where I've been staying recently, places so poor; who knows, this life. . . ." He was thoughtfully watching her thoughts crystallize through the smoke of his cigarette. Corinna felt that she had wanted to say something entirely different: "No; it's not that; I don't know; up where I live people work so hard to earn their bread. And here . . . this seems less than a life for a man."

"Yes, art," the other said with great seriousness, so that Corinna was sorry to have said so much, "sometimes it also appears to me that it's all egotism. But, that's the way it is . . . and these people never talk about anything but themselves. Have you noticed? I, I, I . . . It's like a woman who, to paint a nude, does herself in the mirror. So that she can see all of herself, painted. But the fault is not with poetry, maybe just this poetry. Art really is serious work. I wouldn't know how to explain it, but I know it. Otherwise it would be better to go and dig." But although he was forcing himself to appear certain, it seemed that some doubt

remained in his voice, as if he was asking to be reassured. "I'm a painter," he said, after a moment of silence. "They're a waste of time, you're right."

Corinna was no longer confused by his lack of tact; this was something else.

"Sometime, if you have the patience, I would like to do your portrait, for myself, as a study. You see: you, so young, yet so serious . . . believe me, I know how to do it."

Corinna smiled: "Ah, I believe you." He was a man different from the others. That face that searched hers, frowning, still suggested something childlike, a little bit lost, insecure, but so communicative, reminded her of someone, in one of those strange similarities that does not have to do with facial features and would not support a side by side comparison, but yet exist and come from one knows not where, and consist of one knows not what . . . ah, Gherardo, that's it, he reminded her of Gherardo.

After ceremoniously seeing off the last intellectual, like putting out the last candle, Franca asked her excitedly:

"What was Frassi saying that was so interesting?"

"Who? The one who was talking to me just now? Who is he?"

"What, you don't know who he is? He wasn't talking to anyone but you. He's Frassi, our greatest painter."

Since that day Franca had saddled her with an undesired reputation for artistic taste as, after a heated

discussion with the most intimate of her avant-garde friends, she had willingly admitted to Corinna that their art was already passé.

XVII

It was not without emotion that after so many years Gherardo found himself in the office in which his father had tried for so long to develop in him a passion for the trade. The old man had had faith in him, but also doubts; he had known that Gherardo was smarter than his brother but also less self-confident. The office was still the same, with the same old furniture that gave the impression of having always been old; his brother Robert was conservative.

Mastiani had his satisfaction; finally Gherardo's true situation had been revealed to him, he had finally been permitted to delve into the details of the difficulties that besieged them. The pleasure he derived from these misfortunes, together with his passion for numbers, for the intricacies of accounting, transported him to a true paradise. In addition to the bills that came due at the end of the year other expenses had come up; as usual, everything occurred at once. Gherardo had come to his brother to ask advice, perhaps with the vague hope of receiving, without having to ask, an offer of help.

His brother listened with obvious impatience. And then he wanted to quickly make the situation clear:

"At the moment I don't have a cent available. I'm up to my neck. You know how it is, we in industry are always in the same boat: we have no money except on the books; what we earn is all reinvested in our operations. Anyway, even if I could right now it wouldn't resolve anything. It would put off your debts for a while, but in the end you'd be deeper in the hole than ever. What you need is a real and proper reorganization, once and for all. Or sell? That would end all your worries. You could go back to your tranquil former life, among your antiquities."

At hearing talk of reselling Cerreta, Gherardo was amazed to realize that the thought had never crossed his mind. It seemed that henceforth everything and everybody would be trying to push him down that road; immediately he felt himself stiffen in resistance.

Now for Roberto, having satisfied the obligations of duty, the conversation became truly gratifying. For the first time he was able to give vent to a blind resentment, somewhere between contempt and rancor, that had smoldered for years. It was unfair that Gherardo, escaping the thorns of business and every other obstacle, had been able to live a lazy life of ease and refinement, a life that he, so much better off financially, hadn't been able to permit himself. Overtly he scorned such a life, but in spite of himself he could only envy it. To see Gherardo coming to him for advice, wrestling with embarrassment, was a triumph that only helped to nourish his nearly boundless self-esteem.

Gherardo tried to justify himself: "It's not that I've made a mistake in buying Cerreta. In three or four years the estate will turn a profit. It's enough to let the coppice woods grow; there are two or three thousand hundredweight of charcoal in every cut, without counting the by-products: faggots, logs, poles and so on. But it takes time; the Corporation clear-cut everything. On the agricultural side you must understand that for fifty years and maybe more everything has been allowed to go wild; to restore the fields to their former condition will be worse than starting from scratch. But if I can carry it through I will have an estate of twenty or twenty-five farms and more than a thousand hectares of good, productive forest. The value will be doubled. It will take some years of sacrifice, but then it will pay off. Of course, when I bought Cerreta I didn't know all these things. But to sell, now? What about everything that I've spent already?"

His brother had asked Mastiani many specific questions about the extent of cultivation, the houses, the forest. As if against his will, he found a certain interest in visualizing the grand extent of Cerreta. He too at times had toyed with the idea of quitting the daily grind of business, where one never knew how things will end up. He had always had the idea of land vaguely in mind, over and above the fact that every wise investor should diversify. Now everything he had was tied up, and who knows, it could be that the good times for industry had passed, that the fruit of so many years of work could just lie there, in buildings and un-

productive machinery, without value. Land was elementary wealth, the basis of everything; however little it yielded, it always produced food.

"Take me up there one of these days. We'll see what it's all about."

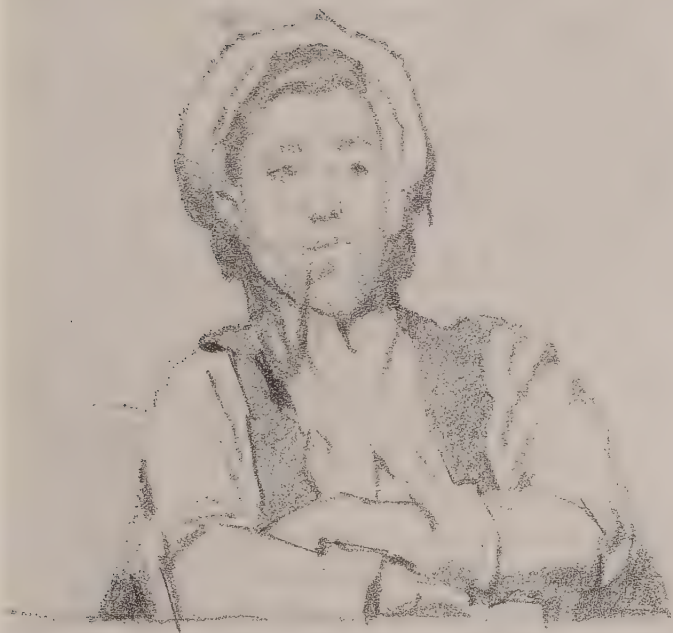
Meanwhile they had listed the most urgent payments due: the bank loan, the interest on the first mortgage he had taken on Cerreta, the taxes, the money needed to cover current expense. It came to a total that Gherardo refused to believe.

"And there's really zero net revenue?"

"I don't know where the money goes; the harvests disappear through one's fingers. There's wine to sell, but it doesn't amount to much, Cerreta's vines are infested with the phylloxera; we need to reestablish the vineyards. We won't talk about oil; when you see the state of the olive groves you'll understand for yourself. And to reestablish those we need time. In March and April there will be lambs if the lambing goes well. There should also be a small cutting in the forest. There used to be herds of pigs at pasture, but since the forest was clear-cut there are no acorns."

"How about your old art; have you thought of turning that into money?"

Yes, Gherardo had thought about that. He had gone to a dealer who, in the old days, used to come to him to get, without charge, an opinion on the authenticity of a painting. However, when the dealer learned that the shoe was on the other foot and that Gherardo from buyer had become seller, he had run for cover.



Times had changed; this was no longer the moment; everyone wanted to sell. He explained that with paintings the same phenomenon occurred as on the stock exchange: when stocks are rising everyone is a buyer with an eye to early profits, then when the prices begin to fall everyone is in a hurry to sell out and every day prices are lower. They could think about it, though; perhaps an auction sale

Maybe . . . but Gherardo drew the line at his Giovanni di Paolo. He knew that he would never be able to sell that painting, as he would never sell Cerreta. They were of the same race, that little green Madonna with the great ingenuous eyes, and his wild land.

Brother Roberto got another surprise, the interest shown by his wife in Gherardo's case. When he announced that he thought he'd better go to Cerreta to see what was really involved "with that half-crazy brother of mine — I think he's getting senile — you never know, it could be a pile of rocks that to him look beautiful. Before putting in my money I want to see it with my own eyes, which have never failed to tell me the truth." Agnes, in that sharp tone her husband knew so well, had said: "Take me with you."

Roberto tried to explain that this was men's business, that a woman would be in the way, but she had an answer to everything. She would give no trouble, all she wanted was to wander around the villa, to rummage around; some things, even if they seemed minor, were seen better by women. "But in the end, what would you be committing to?" she asked suspiciously.

"Paying Gherardo's bills, if he can't handle those that are coming due." Agnes had looked doubtful. "Don't worry. I'll take my security on the property, you understand. I'm afraid poor Gherardo has gotten involved in predicament that is too much for him. And rather than let some usurer eat everything, it's better that I take a look at the situation. After all, he's my brother. It's true that he went his own way, that he never wanted to apply himself, but after all blood is thicker than water."

Roberto had resigned herself; he'd have to take her along. It was not just her character: he also had to respect her wishes because of her father's money, her father the big dry goods merchant, who for years had lived alone with a woman servant, by now practically head of the household. And even though Agnes had been kept in school up to the time she married, she had somehow developed her own commanding way, with a fist of iron.

At successive meetings Mastiani had explained every detail of the situation with his distinctive clarity, along with frank comments that jolted Gherardo. Faced with the alliance of these two practical spirits who had so quickly understood each other and united to isolate him, as if in the witness chair, Gherardo felt himself growing smaller and smaller: his obvious novice, his lack of a businessman's instincts in dealing with an enterprise of Cerreta's scope, were not only ridiculous, but downright blameworthy. He had no right to make mistakes of the type he had, even if he

was paying out of his own pocket. His place was among his old paintings, in the old rooms of Via dell'Anguillara, like a lunatic who, as long as he's harmless, is permitted to fritter away his time in whatever pursuits he cares to. But to want to manage and administer men and things was another matter entirely. It was not as if he had taken on a going concern, a farm in good order, of which there are so many, where all one needed to do was to pocket the receipts. This was an operation that needed a real man in charge, the sort of man tempered by adversity and ripe in judgment needed to resolve the fate of an impoverished estate in a faraway place, against difficulties of every sort that Gherardo didn't understand, would never understand.

That is what, if they didn't actually say it, was conveyed by the conspiratorial looks exchanged by Mastiani and the brother, as if congratulating themselves on the practical demonstration of a truth that had been obvious to them for a long time. In conclusion: all the debts had to be consolidated and reduced to one oppressive but nevertheless just possibly, Fate willing, life-saving loan, so that he would deal with only one creditor. But before promising, Roberto wanted to have a look. And it was agreed that he would come out one Sunday; the other days he couldn't get away from his business.

During the few days that Gherardo spent in Florence to revive contact, not with the art world that he avoided at all costs, but with the spirit of the streets,

with their life, crowded and unknown, he realized that he had changed from his earlier ways more than he had imagined. Somehow he was closer to people, to things. It seemed impossible to have changed so much in less than a year. The interest he took in the things of Cerrera now appeared to extend to the people who he had always seen in the streets without really ever having taken them into consideration, as if they didn't belong to his world. Perhaps it was being knocked about by his knot of problems, and the worry of facing them, that for the first time gave him a sense of the uncertainty of tomorrow.

Thus, for example, passing before a safemaker's shop where for years and years he had seen without ever observing the pale face bent over a work bench, he surprised himself thinking of the web of daily difficulties in which so many were involved, of the chains that men drag around with them. The sense of communion with the people of the street was like a new freedom expanding his lungs. When he failed to avoid acquaintances from those old days from which he was nowadays detached, when he didn't manage in time to avoid an encounter, he would find himself embarrassed, as if he was no longer one of them, as if he had changed his social class. And he felt a certain scorn for them, perhaps not devoid of a hint of envy, a sentiment perhaps natural to one who, trying to do better, is engulfed by awkwardness toward those who know how to live without thought and without problems.

The egotism of the very rich, of those who lived off

the savings of their fathers, on the work of others, filled him with amazement. Still possible? Yet he, too, in the old days. He returned home gladly. It was better at Cerreta, alone in the bleakness of the empty rooms.

XVIII

It was not unusual for Gherardo, returning from the fields in the evening, to find Count Geminiani waiting for him at the villa. The count had not been able to stay in Rome that winter, felt that he had get back to the country. Gherardo knew that Montorsaio was open to him at any hour of the day or night, but, perhaps from the sense of isolation that his financial situation had engendered, or perhaps because he had simply begun to enjoy his solitude, it was difficult for him to go visiting. As for the count, he said he was too old to mix with people, that he had lost contact with the times; the old should learn to leave the young to their own devices, without burdening them with their dead weight. For their different reasons the two made good company.

"One can be a wonderfully tolerant person," said the count, "as conciliatory as you like, but it's the times that are changing and pushing us aside. I'll be youthful at eighty, if I'm alive; but from here on, with all my good spirits, I will be aware that present a certain character, something between a youth grown old and a doddering though still charming old man. What in my day were good manners today have become ri-

diculous; these youngsters act like stable boys of the old days. Leaving aside the girls; in my time. . . .” Smiling, he interrupted himself. “A bad sign, dear friend, when one starts to say ‘in my time’ and criticize modern women; it means you really are getting old, old in spirit. There’s also the fact that it may be envy.” And after a silence: “The girls today, however, are disconcerting: whether they or their grandmothers are right, goodness only knows. But boys . . . we were worse, in our youth. Sandro, for example, is still a child.”

Perhaps, in speaking, he had come around to what really interested him, his nephew. “He’s a gem. Nothing like I was at his age. He’s not much interested in study though; that’s the cross his mother bears. It doesn’t bother me. For farming one doesn’t need much science; rather, sometimes it’s the science that causes the trouble. And then from youth one shouldn’t demand too much. What does bother me is seeing him so serious, so quiet. Before settling down one should sow one’s wild oats, and not have the urge crop up later, which is worse.” And after a little reflection: “Besides, Sandro is happy in the country; he loves the land. All you have to do is see him up here and you understand that he has that passion; and that is what is essential. In Rome he does nothing but talk of Montorsaiò; he can hardly wait for the glory of coming here for a few days in his Easter vacation. And he likes you all so much.” In his eyes it was a great advantage that his neighbors at Cerreta had clicked with Sandro.

“He’s always saying how lucky it was that you bought Cerreta.”

“This business of making boys study so hard right in their greatest period of development seems to me a big mistake. If you could see him now, after two months in the city, you wouldn’t recognize him. He’s skinny as a rail, has a strange waxy complexion. I would give anything to get him away from there. A boy raised in the open air, compelled to sit four or five hours a day at a school desk in that stale air, it could ruin him forever.”

Count Geminiani had known for some time that Gherardo’s affairs were not going well. When, with their growing friendship, it was no longer possible to avoid speaking of that which was obviously haunting Gherardo, he approached it with great delicacy: “I’m old; I’ve seen a lot and learned little. But one thing I have learned: it’s useless to try to profit from the experience of others. And taking their advice is worse. What do they tell you? Make haste slowly, keep expenses down, don’t try to manage things yourself, as I do at Montorsaio. The fact is that we can’t really believe something until we try it for ourselves, by ourselves. It’s like lovers; just try telling someone who is about to get married that he’s making a big mistake; he’ll bite your head off. Same way with land. To someone who is just starting out it always seems as if no one has ever done it before. And he’s right; they appear to be the same but in reality they’re entirely different, because each person puts his own passion into the

work; and for each person that is different. Each must try for himself. All systems are great and all systems are bad: the only one that works is the one you develop for yourself. It's a matter of persistence. He finally succeeds who doesn't get discouraged, who sticks it out, is hard headed, doesn't look back."

Gherardo couldn't bring himself to reply: "If only I could, if only I had the wherewithal." Instead he changed the subject: "What do you know about Don Vanzetti?" Recently Menciatti had come to the office complaining about the priest. Among the priest's various sidelines, the main one was recruiting girls to work as servants, and wives to work as wet nurses, in the city. It was a flourishing business; he was paid by both sides and it was said that he had a fortune laid aside. He had at his fingertips knowledge of all the families for twenty miles around, kept a register of recent and expected births, a sort of civil register for his purposes. Every Saturday he went to Siena to conduct his business like a manager; he even had office space in a local agency.

Menciatti said that the priest had promised his youngest daughter — a girl who little resembled her sister Anna at the villa, a much more full-bodied, livelier, more robust girl — a job as the housekeeper at a farm estate in Rapolano. Argia had gone to Siena various times to be presented to the owners but had never succeeded in meeting with them. The priest had dealt with her in a pleasant way, had even given her some little gifts. One market day in the agency office, which

was normally full of activity, Argia had found the priest alone. To make a long story short, according to Menciatti, it seems that the priest had laid his hands on her and she had run to the window threatening to scream for help. Argia was engaged to one of the Vaghegginis of Montecchio, a strapping young fellow who, if she had told him, . . . well, poor priest. Meanwhile she had told the padrone. But as soon as the rumor got out, other old stories came to the surface. Everyone felt sorry for the poor woman who kept house for the priest. Before long a group had formed that wanted to get rid of Don Vanzetti.

The priest came to Gherardo, saying that he could check with anyone whether the Menciatti family wasn't well known as a nest of calumny. Hadn't they succeeded in running out a good foreman through Anna sowing discord? He asked Gherardo to put in a good word for him. It wasn't fair that a poor priest, because he wouldn't go along with certain of their doings — "secretive people those Menciatti, always plotting something; even you should be careful, don't trust them too much" — could lose his church or even his priesthood. Since Gherardo was such a friend of Montorsaio, and the count had a brother who was a Monsignor and had full access to the Vatican, a word from the count to the diocese would be enough. Gherardo didn't know whom to believe.

"Let the water run in the mill," Geminiani counseled. "Whatever you do, no one will ever be satisfied; more could always have been done. Leave the trouble

to them; they'll work it out."

But this didn't satisfy Gherardo; beyond the feeling of not fulfilling all of his duties, he would not willingly give up any administration of justice that appeared to be his responsibility. He was relieved of his dilemma by a decision from on high: Don Vanzetti was transferred to Sarteano, in the mountains. And since it was thought that Gherardo had arranged this, his prestige was enhanced considerably.

Gherardo was up before dawn these days and worked late; as soon as it was light he was on horseback. The house was dark, cold; even in bad weather it was better to be outside. He would start with the laborers, with the masons. On returning from the city he had been annoyed to find that Mastiani, as usual, during his absence had done things his own way. With their difference in viewpoint, Gherardo was always disappointed and angry on seeing how his orders had been carried out. It didn't seem possible that an order to build a stable, a sty, or a shed could be understood differently than he intended, but it was as if Mastiani had seen the same vision with lenses that enlarged or reduced, shortened or lengthened; as if the words took on entirely different meanings for him. Gherardo had resorted to giving exact dimensions, making plans and precise drawings; yet Mastiani, with a stupefying regularity that seemed unbelievable, would succeed in devising a way, with infinite care and great ability and always rigorously satisfying the specific requirements, to produce a result that was still not what Gherardo

intended.

Mastiani talked continually of the great advantages that would be achieved by crop rotation. A rudimentary form of rotation already existed on Cerreta's best farms, but, as with everything else, it had been abandoned to the whim of the peasants. And as is well known, what matters to the peasants is wheat. Above all it is essential that there be enough bread, even if the land must be sown in wheat two or three years in a row. It was a sin to exhaust the soil, but without bread what could they do? Gherardo knew the danger of making changes too quickly; he wanted first to find out for himself.

For this reason he began to cultivate the three or four competent families of Cerreta, who were doing well; perhaps also these visits were important to him because he was so alone in spirit. Some evenings, returning home after having succeeded in penetrating a bit into their confidence, he felt a sense of victory, a clear pride, comparable to the joy he had felt as a youth on achieving some progress in a difficult task, or, approaching maturity, in having met an important person. In those conversations he showed a candor, an ingenuous desire to learn, that helped people feel themselves on the same level with him, and often, when they were talking about things they really knew, even higher. At the same time he felt a growing simple and true admiration for their fundamental way of life and its daily texture. Every day he was losing the feeling of pity that he had once had for them: there was

really nothing to feel sorry for, and at times, as they peacefully and securely went about their work, he would watch them almost with envy.

There were the Vaghegginis at Montecchio, the Gepponis at Camporedalda. In both families the one who really ran things was the housewife. Gherardo got along best with Norma of Camporedalda; she was more open, sometimes even humorous. The Vagheggini woman was hard, had a heavy hand; at Camporedalda there was more peace, more joy; Norma got the same result with a looser rein. There were eighteen in the household at Camporedalda living in love and harmony, four generations. The old folks were still living, and the old man was still head of the tenant farm family, though in name only; everyone really came to Norma to ask what to do, even her husband, though he treated her roughly and in anything outside the actual running of the farm he ruled the family. Two brothers, one married, one a bachelor, lived with them. The oldest son had a wife and two little children.

There was no need to feel sorry for the men with their hard labor. In their work there was always the calm, deliberate, slow but sure rhythm of the free man who does a thing when he wants to and because he wants to. It was thus when they followed behind the plow, or when the whole family, on a cold windy day, might be found spading up and entire field together. They were the only ones remaining at Cerreta who still used the spade in the fields; but Norma

would say that the spade has a golden point. When they saw him coming they would raise their heads from the work and salute him without warmth. Confidence would come later, if ever. Gherardo, after having asked what he had come to ask and having chatted a bit with the members of the family he most liked — the girls were not displeased, and at a word from him they would smile and blush as if he had paid them a compliment — decided, somewhat ashamedly, to ask for a spade, to warm up, he said. The old man showed him how to use it, how to lean into the tool with the weight of his body, without straining. In a moment Gherardo was in a sea of sweat, his arms and legs aching. But he felt good: warmed, limber, as if his blood were sparkling within him.

“Yes, it’s hard work,” said the old man.

“The spade is the hardest work,” added another. “But the padrone is giving us a hand.”

“I’d need to keep it up for a while,” Gherardo responded calmly.

In the meantime he had shed his worries. That’s what he envied, not having thoughts. Food, housing, fire in the fireplace, those were sure things. What else did a man really need, when he had security? Sometimes, entering a home he would go check the hearth: the most provident families would always have soup on the fire, and appetizing foods that gave them a sense of physical satisfaction, and if there was nothing else there was the bread, that excellent bread. At the families’ who were lazy and disorganized he would find the

fires out, the hearth filthy. The same difference was even visible outside, on the farm. What did he have that they could envy? Materially, nothing. Joy of the spirit? Perhaps they weren't appreciative of the beautiful seasons, the beauty of the forest, of the fields, of the trees? Certainly among them there were those more intelligent than he. They didn't read books, weren't able to say whether a painting was from the Florentine or the Sienese school; that was all.

Between visits to the peasants, conversations with the always ready and cheerful Ruggero, good old Pasquale, and the ever-dignified Menciatti, and the office routine, he found his solitude so densely filled that he hardly had time miss Corinna, which never failed to give him a sense of remorse, especially when he received a letter from her. He didn't read the papers, on principle. Every so often he would marvel at being able to do without them, not that he missed them: nowadays he didn't even think of them any more. The strange thing was that, when he returned to the city the first thing he looked at was the paper. Letters from Corinna were now his only connection with the world. It seemed impossible that one could so easily shake off the game of civilization and isolate oneself, and feel so good, so free, master of oneself. Corinna's letters were full of names and news, but he sensed that she remained passive about it all, that she let herself be carried here and there by the habitual currents within the family household, without any genuine interest. With satisfaction Gherardo became aware that

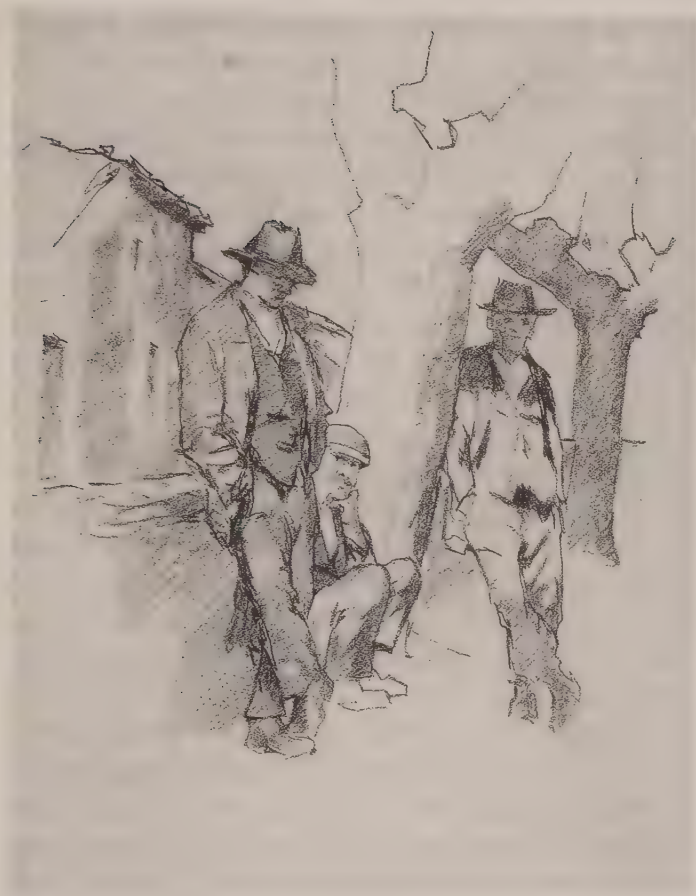
their separation was good for them, and praised himself for having insisted on it. It was good that any crisis that she might be going through would not occur at Cerreta. Every so often, his almost voluptuous pleasure in being alone at Cerreta was invaded by thoughts of Corinna which took concrete form in an acute, powerful nostalgia.

One evening at Montorsaio, while they were at the dinner table, Count Geminiani received a telegram: Sandro was not well, a recurrence of a tenacious bronchitis that had dragged along since autumn. Concerned, the count ordered his automobile. "I want to see if I can get the night train from Siena. If they telegraphed, it means that it's not a minor matter. That boy has taken a bad turn for the worse this winter. If they had listened to me . . . it's useless, we're country people, made to live in the open . . ."

XIX

The first to come to the annual accounting was the tenant of Le Palazze, Baroni. His was one of the oldest families of Cerreta. Eighty or a hundred years before they had been woodcutters; now they were the tenants of the farm that had been created around the ancient towers on the hilltop that faced Cerreta. Tradition had it that Le Palazze had warred with the castles that dominated the mouths of the valleys — Montarrenti, Cerreta, Castiglion che Dio sol sa — but actually the towers were only an outwork of Cerreta, and the farmstead, like all those defended by towers and walls, had been part of the Ardenghi property, that vast feudal territory that extended from Colle di Val d'Elsa far along the valley of the Merse.

During the depression of the late 1800s they had become woodsmen again. Old Baroni still remembered certain winters when he was a boy during which, he said with a simplicity that made Gherardo shiver, they had faced famine. "My father," he recounted, "on the days when there was no bread, would put us all in the little room of the bread oven, light a tiny fire, and have us sing." Back in the time of Countess Adelaide they had returned to the land, re-established themselves as



tenant farmers. After the failure of the corporation's experiment in managing the farms directly, the Baronis, who were among the few who had stuck it out, had been assigned enough land to make three farms. As a result they hadn't succeeded in husbanding it well, though they were fine people and good workers. Their manpower was simply not enough to do it all.

Mastiani read the accounts aloud to the head of the farmstead, who frowned in an attempt to understand. Gherardo was completely committed to the importance of these results. This was his first accounting, closing out the first year of his administration. It was like his first examination; the accounts would speak clearly, and tell if he had done well. The peasants would judge the results: and theirs was the important judgment.

After some explanation, Baroni made his cross under the total; at Cerreta no one knew how to sign his name. He had a credit balance: things had not gone badly, and with so much land that favored stockbreeding, the sheep and pigs had found plenty of pasture in the fields. Gherardo turned the pages of the estate's accounts.

"I'm sure you've heard, Baroni, that we're opening up new farms; we're in the process of reorganizing the estate. The Senesi family will take one farmstead, with the house across from yours. We'll make another by dividing the Cerreta tenant farmstead. To even things up it's necessary that we take back those faraway fields in the high plain, the ones you have more or less aban-

done. For which I don't blame you: you have too much land. You'll be advised of the changes in due time."

Baroni had listened without his face revealing anything, one of those gaunt, sharp, decidedly Sienese faces that Gherardo tried to penetrate, to understand. Then he proceeded to explain what this really meant. In the end, he would lose land that represented the production of ten bushels of grain; he would be short of wheat, there were so many in the family. Ruggero, the foreman, broke in: "But you've never planted it!"

"Not true; I used to seed it, back before you were here at Cerreta. It's poor land, so I left it fallow. But in the new year I plan to use it."

"Look," said Gherardo, "after taking away those hillsides on which you've never produced anything but a little pasture for the sheep, you'll still have eighteen to twenty hectares of land; enough to make two farms."

"So be it if you insist, Signor Padrone; but up there we can't scrape out a living. You'll see. This year, despite all the work and with having to sow late because of the bad weather, we'll be lucky if one seed out of six grows."

"You're all the same," interrupted Mastiani, "greedy for land. A lot of land, and to cultivate it badly. You know where I come from one tenant farmer with half the land you have produces twice as much as you?"

"That may be, sir, in your area, but . . ."

"Oh, come on," said Gherardo impatiently, "we're

doing this for your own good."

"If you say so; if that's the way you want it, you're the padrone," answered the without changing his tone, "but if we can find anything better, we'll leave. You have to understand, even we must try to do the best we can."

Ruggero looked at him with a smile.

"You'll go to Castelfalchi?"

"I still don't know for sure, but they're planning a farm there on the plain of the Elsa, a farm that will produce as much as two hundred sacks of wheat."

"You see, Padrone, how they are," said Ruggero while the farmer was leaving with his account book, "he's already made a deal at Castelfalchi. Pasquale saw him talking to their guard, at the Colonna. Right away he figured there was something . . ."

Without their noticing, old Gepponi had entered. On seeing him Gherardo felt an upsurge of relief from his usual discouragement over the stolid resistance of men and of nature, especially men. In the accounts one could read the story of the Gepponis. Three years earlier they had been placed in a solitary house at Camporedalda that dominated the slopes of the Vene. The first year they had fallen into debt for bread; the second year they had broken even; now they had a credit with the farm administration. The account of the stables said even more. The first year they had only two young heifers that they had gotten from Montecchio; now they had two calves that were already pulling the cart, so there were four work animals

in the stable and two calves expected the coming year. From fifteen sheep initially, with the female lambs they had doubled the flock. And they had two sows, plus shoats and sucklings. All born there, raised by them.

After Gepponi came Boccini of Sant'Ansano. That poor man, aware that with all the bad luck that had befallen him — the sorcerers had done him no good — he had also caused losses for the farm center, was sadly twisting his rag of a cap between his hands, looking at them with wide-open ingenuous eyes.

“Now, Boccini, you’re in debt by three hundred forty three lira and twenty centesimi,” announced Mastiani.

Boccini widened his eyes even further: “Yes sir, but, if you look carefully, in cash I’ve only received one hundred lira from the office. One hundred lira, in one year, with a wife and two kids to dress. The shoes, they wear them out. The rest was for the wheat that I was short. But now things will go better. With that medicine you gave me the moles have disappeared and the lambs have recovered. But if you could have seen how sad it was, padrone, in the mornings, when those poor animals couldn’t stand on their legs, with their hoofs all red.”

Finding that he was not being threatened with anything, Boccini was reanimated, could respond to Gherardo’s smile and go away content that his debts counted for so little and that he could still stay rooted to his little piece of land.

After him came the farmer of the Poggio, Valdini, also called Papero, the Duck, because of his way of walking. He was a short man, thin of legs and arms to the point of appearing rickety, with a stomach that stuck out in front so much that he seemed to stagger holding it up. He made one think of an inferior species, of an earlier link in the chain of human development that had stayed behind in the forest, the last halting step of a lost epoch. Gherardo had been to the Poggio only once. It was a farm in an unpopulated part of the estate, on the heights that dominated the great scrub thickets of Montorsaio. No one knew how and why the idea had come to anyone to build a house up there. Although Ruggero had prepared him before hand, on entering the house Gherardo couldn't believe his eyes. Under the hood of the fireplace were four men of the same monkey-like type as Papero, some younger and some older, from thirty to fifty more or less. One old man, a bag of bones, the father, tended the animals in the stable. There were no women; when the mother had died they couldn't find any wretch of a woman that wanted one of them or would come to work for them. The sons dragged themselves from farm to farm, fired by one management, taken on by another, because they begged, in monotonous degradation, like condemned men. The horror they aroused seemed to accuse the entire human race, as if their degeneracy, no fault of their own, was the fault of all humankind.

Gherardo had never returned; they were like a can-

cerous plague about which nothing could be done. Ruggero had said: "What can you do? They're a burden, people like that; we do whatever we can to keep them going. They work, but it's worse than if they did nothing. And to try to teach them is useless; they just don't get it."

"Did you understand?" repeated Mastiani several times. Papero, in his effort to pay attention, furrowed his protruding brow over his little bright eyes, like someone who is trying to stay awake while he's falling asleep. "Are you tongue-tied?"

On seeing the derisive curling of Mastiani's lips, Gherardo impatiently signaled him to stop it.

"Make your cross here."

He had to hold the pen between the knotty fingers to help him trace the two uncertain lines.

When the Duck had left, Mastiani pushed himself back in the chair. He had readied a long speech, rich in bitter observations on the degeneration of the mountain people, on the effects of their isolation: he became psychiatrist, orator, and prophet all in one with his enthusiastic facility for generalization, but Gherardo cut him short to take care of the latest arrival. Bello had come in, unnoticed, and stood apart, indifferent. Mastiani, continuing to give vent to his mood, said: "Don't they teach you how to act where you come from? Take off your hat." And he began to read the account.

A month or so earlier, one stormy night, Bellow had sneaked away with a full load of wood in his ox-

cart. But on the provincial highway he heard a shout of "Halt there," and found himself confronted by Men-ciatti and Pasquale.

"Where are you taking that wood?"

"Mind your own business," grumbled Bello, but it was like butting against a stone wall; the guards were armed. The wood was taken to the Fattoria. Gherardo hadn't wanted to turn him in to the Carabinieri; this time he was satisfied with fining him.

As the account was being read, when they came to the fine Bello muttered something in his beard.

"What did you say?" asked Ruggero. Bello gave him a surly look, like a menacing mastiff ready to bite.

"Well, speak," said Gherardo.

"I said, the day will come when we'll be doing the fining."

"Right, said Gherardo after a long pause to calm down, "the day when I'm your tenant."

"What can you do with people like this?" asked Mastiani, shaking his head.

"I know you'll kick me out anyway. I'll go gladly, believe me. What could be worse than Casanova? So long as the house doesn't fall down around us first."

They would have liked to get rid of him, but that year he was still needed.

After the accounts were completed the successful farmers — the Vaghegginis, the Gepponis, the Baronis — would be paid their shares. Then Gherardo would need to provide wheat for the rest, for those who otherwise wouldn't have enough to eat.

XX

Since Roberto had sent word that he would be bringing his wife, Gherardo wired Corinna that he would like her to come to Cerreta. He didn't want to give them the impression that Corinna was being standoffish. She took the train up to Firenze to meet him and they drove down to Cerreta. On the way Gherardo explained the situation: the help of his brother at this moment would be providential. He didn't know his sister-in-law very well; she appeared to be very much a housewife, simple, a bit rigid perhaps, like small town people with rather narrow-minded ideas. During the trip up from Rome Corinna had suffered a strange, almost painful impatience that toward the end had become agonizing, making it difficult even to breathe. Being with Gherardo had calmed her, but then she was again overcome with a disquieting anxiety.

At Cerreta they encountered snow. The afternoon had barely begun but already, in the growing darkness along the road, the skeletal form of the chestnuts, with their branches highlighted by the light coating of snow, took on the aspect of a legendary Nordic forest.

"We can expect them tomorrow." Ruggero had run

up from the Fattoria to meet them while Anna was already on the stairs, in the corridors, throwing open doors and windows, pulling sheets and towels out of wardrobes. They lit lights in the rooms; Beppe the houseman passed by, loaded with firewood. The rooms were silent and icy as tombs. Gherardo sent Corinna to warm herself in the Fattoria, at the fire in that great hospitable fireplace.

"And the manager?"

"He's in Siena; it's market day."

Not even the flames succeeded in warming Corinna from the iciness that had stricken her on entering the house. It was not only the sadness of winter up here; it seemed as if a reproach were awaiting her in the abandoned house, as if it deserved something from her and she had failed to respond.

The guards returned; it was already dark. They were glad to see the padroni. They put the guns in their racks and came to shake hands. Pasquale, with his good-natured face, was smiling with every pore. Menciatti, more contained, stayed behind, at attention. Gherardo had the men sit on the bench across from them. Even their simple, open cordiality seemed to her a reproof; she had given them very little reason for it. She asked for the news of their families, then asked about Teresa of Castiglioni.

"Ah, that good for nothing Anselmo has come back," said Pasquale. "You know, he's really a burden for that little family, and just when it seemed they were getting back on their feet"

"But doesn't he work, doesn't he do anything?" asked Gherardo.

"What would he do? He's ruined from the drinking. If he manages to get a little money he's off to the bar and with one glass of wine he's cooked. And there at the Osteria Bianca, there's a certain bunch who hang out, exactly his type. . . ."

Strange: that news had a real interest also for her; an interest she felt personally.

In the villa, in the bedrooms, in the cold of the great salon, they found great fires in the fireplaces, tufts of green holly in the vases, branches of dried oak leaves that showed their autumn colors, boughs of hazel already sprouting buds. And the diaphanous smile of Anna that vanished like the closing of a door. Anna appeared more reserved, more distant than ever.

In the night Corinna woke unexpectedly. To find Gherardo next to her almost frightened her. Afterward she could no longer sleep. As she lay waiting for the dawn to filter through the blinds, it seemed to her that she was experiencing a precipitous process of change occurring, deep within her. Then she realized that she had decided; she would not return to Rome; she would remain here.

The brother and sister-in-law arrived in the morning. Up through the valley of the Rigolenso the horn sounded at the curves. The roar of the motor would sound loudly, then disappear in a fold of the hills, to reappear still louder and more menacing; they heard it nearing with a sense of apprehension.

The men went immediately towards Causa, in the area where the most cultivated fields were; they had little time to lose. Gherardo observed, not without irony, that Mastiani and his brother delighted in each other's company. By now this realization no longer bothered him; it was so natural, so spontaneous, it was almost a pleasure to observe. Rather, what bothered him a bit was something that happened unexpectedly with Ruggero: showing Roberto a stable, he had said, "Ah, one can see immediately that you truly understand business," with an admiring and ingenuous smile that Gherardo felt he knew.

Left alone, Corinna and Agnes didn't even try to carry on a conversation. Corinna was cold; she would just as soon stay all day by the stove. Agnes began to pose some of the questions that were on her mind.

"When you bought, did you find much stuff in the villa?"

"Lots of furniture of this type," replied Corinna, pointing out an easy chair of flowery style, "it's in terrible taste, and also uncomfortable, but I find them amusing. In the fattoria, in the guards' rooms, there are some Sienese benches, some nice wardrobes. Sooner or later we'll bring them over here into the villa; every time we come up here we talk about it; and then, you know how it is, he's always outside, in the woods, and we end by never finding the time."

"No, I meant to say household things: linens, silverware, woollens. . . ."

"I wouldn't know; Anna, the housekeeper, does

everything. I never thought about it. But I've always had everything I needed."

"Is there a good henhouse?"

"Yes, let's go out," said Corinna. The fog was beginning to clear; the sun was shining on the slopes of Boscogrosso. In the open air it seemed to her that she would feel better, breathe more freely.

One of Corinna's few executive acts had been to move the henhouse from below the piazza of the villa, where the wife of one of the managers of the Corporation, a good farmer's housewife, had installed it, and banish it again to behind the Fattoria. The morning din, plus always finding some silly bird underfoot that had managed to fly the coop, had become insupportable. She had to smile, thinking that if Cerreta belonged to her sister-in-law, the henhouse would be back in its earlier dominant position. "What are you laughing about?" said Agnes.

She felt like telling her. At the same time, she was ashamed of herself for always being so small-minded; would she never be free of this weakness? But with that thought, plus what Gherardo had told her about the loan that he had in mind to ask of his brother, a shade of doubt, growing with each new question from Agnes, was crystallizing. Agnes seemed to be conducting an inquest, an inventory, rather than a visit, so minutely interested was she in the most practical matters. At a certain point Corinna called Anna, because she didn't have the answers to certain questions and also to make her sister-in-law aware of her tactless-

ness, though that would be a subtlety that would never enter her mind. In increasing irritation Corinna felt the desire to talk with Gherardo, to explain to him her doubts, tell him that he should be careful not to be taken by surprise. It was the first time she had felt this commonality of interests with him. Coming down from the terrace that looked out across the valley she noted a wall on the road below; suddenly she remembered; it was there that Sandro had crushed the viper, that day last summer. A day long-ago. How far away Sandro was; the woods were bare now. Strange, in Rome she had never given a thought to Sandro; it would have been so simple, so natural, to look up the Tozzi-Geminianis; it had never crossed her mind. And yet up here

At breakfast, absorbed in their separate thoughts, the men ate hurriedly.

"You understand what's involved now. You've seen it; there's plenty of land."

"Even too much."

"And there are the houses: dilapidated, but they exist. It's a matter of restoration, of recovery, of retying the knots, that's all. I don't want to be too optimistic, but if I continue the improvements for a couple of years the value of the estate will double. True, I've made mistakes; I counted on income to exceed expenses, then, instead, with the purchase of animals, taxes, interest, manpower, I've ended up in the red. I wanted to do things too quickly. It was probably a serious error, yet if one gives in to the slow pace of

things up here one accomplishes nothing. But I badly overestimated my capabilities."

"Capital is what's needed." With difficulty Roberto refrained from saying 'my capital.' "But there are other factors that are difficult to evaluate at first. The people, for example, they're important. From what I've seen, the peasantry is inexperienced and not very willing."

"What do you expect after their abandonment, from the lack of anyone caring? There has never been anyone who would go to work with passion to help them improve."

"Let's not kid ourselves, the facts are obvious. Changing their ways, bringing them along little by little, is missionary work, a way to grow old. If you don't deal bluntly with them, it's time thrown away."

All in all, the business interested Roberto. If, God unwilling, things didn't go well for Gherardo and it fell upon him to take over the property, it wouldn't be a great tragedy. The asset was there, what was needed was to put it on its feet. But he was in a position to wait; he had no need of quick results. Cerreta was an isolated place, distant, but today, with the automobile, distances no longer existed; besides, he had heard talk of a plan for a railroad that would connect Siena with Massa Marittima, passing right through the heart of the estate. Basically it would be a long-range speculation, but there was the security of the property itself. If, sooner or later, as might happen, there was an awakening of the region, the benefits could be great. Gradually he too was feeling a desire for land, and one

could sense, from the many questions that Agnes was asking, that even she was interested.

"What can I say to you; you've gotten yourself into a mess. For someone like you, used to a regular, steady income, this is a headache."

Certainly, for him, with his experience with people and practical matters, with his energy, his power as an organizer, it would be a completely different story.

"This is not something I would normally do, but for a brother . . . we'll see; what do you need to keep going?"

Gherardo had in mind a long-range plan of development, but his brother considered this impracticable: "For an operation like this it's a little too early. Time is needed; one needs to look, to listen . . . All in all, what I can do for now is co-sign a loan for six months, a year. Of course even I will need guarantees, you understand; things have to be done in a businesslike manner, for one never knows what may happen; and, I have two children. Later, when the loan is due, we'll see."

Mastiani approved. He approved everything that Roberto said, hung on his every word with eyes full of admiration that clearly said: "This is a real man, he would have known how to do things right. . . ."

From the terrace they watched their visitors leave. The harsh gleam of the headlights would momentarily bathe first one slope, then another, in full light, then fall suddenly into darkness, as the car followed the winding road down. Once they were alone again,

Corinna had fallen into silence as they sat in the dark salon with its coats of arms; then she had gone to bed. She was cold; she felt she might have a fever. Gherardo was subdued, as if he had lost all faith, all courage. He felt alone as he had never felt before; even that smile, those servile words of Ruggero's, the small hypocrisies of those around him added to his solitude, to his discouragement.

But at least he could go ahead, continue his work.

XXI

Anseldo tried to act as if he were in charge. "I'll see to it that that she's taken care of by that good-for-nothing." Teresa paid no attention to him, but after Amedeo had learned about his sister's disgrace, Teresa had laid down the law: "I don't want that Rocco in my house. As long as I'm here he will not pass through that door." Virginia never spoke of him. It was almost as if that little being didn't even exist, there at Sant' Ansano. But she had little milk and the baby was barely growing.

It didn't take long for Anseldo to realize that there was very little of use to him in that house. Bread, polenta, and porridge were not food for his poor stomach. The watery wine they drank, like rinsewater from a cask, was enough to make one laugh; he was certainly accustomed to very different stimulants. There was no money to be seen. Lucky for him, the host at the Osteria Bianca was a man of the world and extended him credit.

The Osteria Bianca is the only house one meets between Rosia and Pian di Feccia, for twenty kilometers of road through the forest. The cart drivers had to stop there for food and shelter in bad weather. The

eldest daughter of the innkeeper ran the place, a shapely woman of about thirty. It was rumored that she had been seduced years ago by a famous brigand from the woods of Montorsaio who hung out at the Osteria Bianca. Nowadays, they said, she had something going with the brigadier of Carabinieri at Pian di Feccia; times had changed. Even her father was a bit scared of her. He ran a small general store, more as an excuse than anything; what really maintained their prosperity was the clandestine commerce that flowed through the inn: lambs that disappeared from a flock, sheep that supposedly had died in the woods; carts moving at night full of hay, charcoal, posts, and timber. Purchases at the little legal store — poultry, eggs, linen, fabrics for the housewife — justified to the guards the passage of carts through the lanes of their estates.

On the afternoons that Anselmo spent at the inn, in the long silences between one passage and another of the carts — by preference they customarily traveled in groups — it seemed that he and the innkeeper were taking each other's measure. One day the innkeeper hazarded:

"So then, you haven't found a trade yet?"

"The right kind of work, no. I'm not very well suited to hard labor. I would rather . . . but also I can see certain things going on around here . . . these little providers of certain goods . . ."

"You do that sort of thing? It's not that hard. There's no salary; but aside from the uncertainty it

works pretty well. To really know how to operate . . . what do you think?"

It didn't take much to fill him in on the operation; he had figured it out on his own some time ago; the work was well adapted to his capabilities and inclinations. Stretch out in a cart and head out along the road. Keep his eyes open, talk to people, stop at the houses, even if they had nothing to sell. Mix with the families, figure out those with whom one could do business. Pass the good word, now here, now there — to those who wanted to understand, of course. In every family there's an opening: either it's the youth that never sees a penny; or a burdensome debt to be eased; sooner or later they turn to someone who knows how to help. And thus one spreads the business net; and beyond the money, for every successful deal he earned a warmer look from Rosa, the beautiful innkeeper.

Teresa, not seeing her husband for weeks on end, instead of being relieved was more concerned than ever. Anselmo came by Sant'Ansano with a cart and a trotting horse; he bragged about earning more in one night than they did in a year. But not even this indication of his having mended his ways was enough to put her mind at peace. The one who profited was Amedeo; to no longer have his father there beside him in the same room every night gave him a new lease on life.

Since the grandson had arrived the old woman was another person. "You're young again, grandma," Amedeo had said one day. She was in a fever to do

things, to keep busy, as if she didn't know where to light. Teresa seemed to understand, and they avoided looking at each other. The birth of Virginia's baby had changed so many things between them, without their saying anything. Virginia's milk dried up, but the baby was used to not eating enough and hardly complained any more; his tired cries were lost in the immensity of their bed. He languished like a little plant that was drying up.

More and more at the Osteria Bianca Anselmo was taking over. His worldly experience overwhelmed the dull-witted innkeeper, and his swaggering ways conquered the buxom daughter. Almost without their awareness, he and Rosa found themselves taking on the ways and habits of man and wife. As soon as he had taken the upper hand, it seemed as if she was part of the deal.

For some time, however, the business at the Osteria Bianca had been slow. Anselmo said that it was the fault of the ruling class, who were so busy guarding their estates that it was best not to take chances. He himself practically abandoned the cart; if worst came to worst he could always go out with it if he needed to get some information. That job had been inherited by an old guy called the Maestro because he knew how to read and write, and could recite from memory whole sections of *Gerusalem Liberated*, giving the verses a monotonous rhythm reminiscent of a monkey rocking in his cage. Nowadays Anselmo took part in the real and proper business, the organization. And this

brought him up against the guard Pasquale. More than anyone he was a problem; and the ultimate blow, the affair of Bello's sheep, wouldn't have happened except for Pasquale's nosing around. Anselmo felt the suspicion of the guard tightening about him like a net. The great friendship that grew between him and Bello was partially born from the resentment that they both harbored against Pasquale. They felt so profoundly in agreement on this point that their mutual interest in other matters came as a necessary consequence.

The sheep deal was simple. A shepherd passed by, one who went back and forth to the Maremma. Bello's sheep were in pasture in the woods of Selvalta, near the highway. The traveling shepherd's sheep got loose, entered the woods, got mixed up with Bello's. The shepherd got his out, but it happened that they were slightly increased in number. Seven or eight sheep had been added to his flock; who would notice among two hundred or more head? The next day Bello reported the loss at the Fattoria. With a peasant in debt, who was planning to leave, there was no way to recoup; the loss was entirely to the padrone.

Pasquale arrived on the scene. First of all, why had Bello taken his sheep to pasture so far from Casanova?

"The scrub is too thick down there; they can't even get into the woods. And in the fields, with this year's drought, there's not a blade of grass. In Selvalta, between the turkey oaks, there's still a bit of pasture. It's a lot of trouble for us to take them so far, but what else can we do?"

Returning to the highway, Pasquale entered the inn. In one corner, playing cards, were the innkeeper, Anselmo, and two cart drivers.

"Was there any shepherd at the inn Saturday or Sunday?"

"In the inn, no one, Pasquale," the innkeeper answered carelessly.

"Or passing by, did anyone pass?"

"What do you expect, plenty pass by. Certainly."

Anselmo spoke up resentfully: "And who are you to want to know so much?"

"It's none of your business," answered Pasquale, "you'd do better to think of your family . . . if I were-drone, you wouldn't stay one more day at Sant'Ansa-no."

"As if I'd stay!" cried Anselmo. "That's no place for me. What do you take me for, a peasant?"

The innkeeper calmed them down: "Have a glass of vino, Pasquale. And blessings on you too, Anselmo; let each one do his own work."

Pasquale sat down, watching the card game in progress, recounted that a farmer of Cerreta was missing seven sheep, right from the woods of Sevalta, down below. For a guard who had failed in his guarding this was a serious affair. And for some time, he said, too much had been disappearing in these parts.

Then he went to Pian di Feccia, to report to the brigadier.

He had no definite information; maybe it was his antipathy for Anselmo that made his mind keep re-

turning to the Osteria Bianca. He couldn't prove anything, but the fact was that if several bales of charcoal were taken, if from the herds of pigs in the woods several turned up missing, it always occurred in the vicinity of the Selvalta road. There were no longer any brigands, as in the time of Maestroni, Rosa's former friend, but the stuff disappeared nevertheless.

At Pian di Feccia the brigadier, a young man of thirty, had asked if there were indications pointing to anyone in particular.

"Well, to actually accuse someone, no."

"But you have your suspicions? Maybe you could tell me in confidence. You won't be held in any way responsible."

"You know, until we can take them in the act, it's better to not let them suspect anything. Otherwise, they'll never be caught. But look, the farmer Bello is a no-good. This winter he was caught hauling off a cartful of wood at night. The padrone didn't want to turn him in, but to have compassion for some people is a mistake. And now that he's given notice that he's leaving he would do this sort of thing just for spite. He's rubbish. From what I've heard said, he's got an understanding with that Anselmo who's returned from his travels, who hangs out at the Osteria Bianca. What do you think of him, this Anselmo?"

"He's not exactly a saint. But what would he do with them, those seven sheep? He could hardly put them under his jacket; seven sheep would be pretty obvious."

Pasquale hesitated to respond, but then, as if it had occurred to him on the spur of the moment, dared to say:

“Well, someone who hangs out at the Osteria would easily be able to arrange this sort of business between farmers and merchants. So many people pass; and who’s to say who sees who? There would have to be someone to organize these things, as for example, with those sheep, so that they’d be sure to be there when the shepherd passed. Does that make sense?”

The brigadier dismissed him impatiently: “Leave that sort of thinking to us. Let’s each stick his own job, okay; you’re the watchman.”

And with his soldiers he staked out one detachment at the column of Montarrenti and another at the fork of the Montorsaio road and the Massa highway, when the missing sheep must have already arrived at the distant plain of Follonica. And many passed by, all with sheep. And in the long hours of the evening he didn’t fail to stop by for a visit at the Osteria Bianca; after all, it was good to stay on amicable terms with them, if for nothing else than to gain information.

Menciatti and Pasquale took to making the rounds on their own account at night. It was enough to keep a watch on two or three passage points, like hunters waiting for their prey. But it took a long time, going from one end to the other. One dark night, by the road of Pia, while they were dropping down toward Sant’Ansano, they saw two shadows moving in the underbrush. They called them to halt, with their guns

leveled. And moving closer they found, shivering with shame, Virginia and Rocco di Camporedalda who practically fell on their knees praying that they say nothing to anyone.

"Oh, why don't you two get married, you miserable things," said Pasquale, "if only for that little creature who's growing up without a name, like a little goat."

"Mamma doesn't want us to," said Virginia as she stopped crying. "First it was he who wouldn't, but he changed his mind, now he really wants to."

"You must be pretty worthless if Teresa doesn't want you. And you can thank God that this girl has a father who's less than no father at all. If it were up to me you'd pay dearly, sooner or later."

XXII

Almost despite itself spring arrived, in fits and starts, like a developing adolescent. On the slopes, over the poor yellow prematurely aged wheat, there ran great waves of new green; in the fields a few plums and stunted peach trees rusty with sickness opened all in blossom; in the brush the hawthorns, the blackthorns, the wild fruits displayed their fragile embroidery of budding branches amidst the evergreen of arbutus and ilex. Some yellow *cruognolo* were already flowering around the young oaks, still dressed in their dry autumn foliage. Along the streams hazels and alders were already wafting pollen from their frail garlands. In abandoned fields invaded by junipers one could find an ancient apple tree, only survivor of an old orchard, trying to push a tuft of blossoms through the treacherous mistletoe infesting its half dead branches, like an old man who feels his life blood running out, struggling in vain to regain his youth.

Dawn came early, the cool air flooded by an intense sun in a clear sky. As the air warmed, however, the first clouds were born, soft and white, and then more often than not before evening the sky would turn iron gray and it would rain as if it would never stop. The

farmers complained; in this weather it was impossible to finish anything. The spring labors, after the winter lull, were many and then some, and all at the same time; the men huddled under the shelter of the loggias, watching impotently as the fields became seas of mud. Gherardo bit his nails; everything ground to a standstill, and it seemed as if they must even be slipping backwards.

On resuming her permanent residence at Cerreta, Corinna felt an anxious sense of security, as if on finding oneself once again among old friends whom one hopes to find unchanged after having neglected them for a period. With a certain dismay she felt the months passed in the city canceling themselves from her memory as if they had never existed, as if they counted for nothing. There remained only a bitter-sweet taste of the past, of the fullness of youth. It seemed that this would cast a shadow also over the future; and it didn't help even to immerse herself in the concerns of the present. Anyway the things around her were good, familiar; her spirit clung to them as if feeling something solid in her hands.

Confronting the subtle uncertain changes that he noted in her spirit, Gherardo pulled back; he didn't want to inquire too closely, didn't want to know. The barrier that had risen between them couldn't be abolished or eased by any action of his. It had to fall, would fall, of itself. A change created purposely would not have suited him; in fact it couldn't be created that way. If occasionally he surprised her immersed in re-

flection he would try not to notice it. Her introspection plus his discouragement were treacherous allies against whom he needed to be on guard lest he be caught unprepared and overwhelmed.

On one of her first days back, almost against her will, Corinna found herself heading toward Sant'Ansano, as if to visit again one of the milestones on their road, that random, leisurely combination of events that had so changed her life, but that had not yet given her equilibrium.

When, on leaving the fields of the Piano behind, she entered the chestnut grove, she understood suddenly and almost unconsciously, that the woods had changed, and that the trees, still seemingly barren, were charged in all their innumerable branches with the irresistible eagerness of sprouts, of flowers, of fruit. Only a few leaves and buds were yet visible, but all the air was green, a greenish tinge enveloped the young saplings sprouting from the bases of the trees; further up the trunks the first buds were swelling. She stopped to feel them with her fingers; they were still closed, but tumescent with life, like cicadas wrapped in their cocoons; on some branches they were just beginning to open, and the pulpy knot of the leaf that was about to unfurl seemed pregnant, voluptuous, the issue of a sensual act. Already clearly evident in some was the minutely sculpted architecture of the network of veins in the new leaf, still in the process of being born.

At Sant'Ansano Amedeo was preparing the soil for

the corn planting, behind oxen yoked to the plow. Teresa, whom she hadn't seen since the days of Castiglioni, seemed changed; sadder, perhaps, and also older, but seemingly taller and stronger. In the girl who was sweeping the courtyard, agile and in a certain sense beautiful, it was difficult to recognize the half-witted shepherdess who had lost her sheep in the chestnut grove that rainy day with Sandro. In all of them there was evident that sense of the ordered occurrence of events, the pride in self-sufficiency based on their own work, that is so much a part of the dignity of life. Corinna thought of Castiglioni, of Gherardo, of his work. She felt herself overcome with a religious sense of humanity; this was the result of Gherardo's work. If Gherardo had not lived except for this, if in the future he were to accomplish nothing else, the saving of that little family was enough to render his life beautiful.

And in itself that was but a small part of the work he had begun and whose completion was not yet certain. This was what he was defending, not the goods, not the possessions, but the human product of his work. It was the fear of seeing himself lose the little that he had accomplished, of having to let fall the burden he had taken up, that tormented him, that so often made him seem sad and far away.

At Teresa's invitation she entered the house. It was neat, in order; its extreme simplicity gave it a sense of richness, the richness of the strictly necessary. "This is the bedroom where Amedeo sleeps and that is the bed

that the padrone sent us," said Teresa almost with pride. "If God maintains our strength it will be paid for." Corinna felt rebuked that she knew nothing about it; it seemed that she, the woman, should have thought of the bed. In the kitchen, in a gleam of sun that filtered through the half-closed shutters, she saw the old woman at the fireplace. She was feeding a baby from a bowl with a wooden spoon. At every spoonful the little head twisted with a pained grimace; one could just make out the little skinny body through the swaddling clothes. With great difficulty the old woman succeeded in making a few drops of food pass the tightened lips. Then there followed a tantrum; in the throes of anger the baby trembled all over; a great fit of crying shook the little limbs like a convulsion. With a shiver of alarm and almost of repugnance Corinna leaned over the little contorted face that the grandmother lifted toward her.

"How old is he?"

"He'll be four months on the eighth."

At the sound of a new voice the little creature opened his eyes and looked, suddenly stopping its crying. Then it lifted its little groping hands toward a ray of sunlight reflected from Corinna's crystal necklace, as if to grasp it. And it opened its lips as if to smile.

"Has the doctor seen him?"

"Yes ma'am, he's been here."

"What did he say?"

"He said that if he were the son of signori, perhaps

something could be done to save him, but for us it was useless to fight it. Then he insulted the little fellow, saying 'if he goes, it's one wretch fewer; if he lives, one consumptive more.' I don't know if you know him; he's a brute."

Without having been asked anything about her husband, Teresa offered on her own: "My man appears to have found work. He goes around with a cart to the women; buys and sells, comes and goes with merchandise, keeps busy. Let's hope for the best."

Teresa accompanied her for some distance to the edge of the chestnut grove, without speaking; she appeared distant, as if consumed by a thought that bothered her and that she was unable to shake.

On the plain that overlooks Cerreta, Corinna bumped into Gherardo, who was watching the pruning of the olive trees at Capanni's, the tenant of the new farm created from dividing that land in two. Ruggero, from below, was giving instructions: "No, that one no, don't you see, for heaven's sake, that would leave an empty space? Can you really not see that? There, that dry one, below; it's all wood." Capanni came from Val di Merse and on his farm in the valley there were no olives; to teach him required the patience of Saint Augustine.

And what a disaster, the winter wheat! It was coming up as sparsely as if sown by a miser, thin, yellow as if from hunger. Already it was obvious that vetch and weeds were taking over. The peasants all agreed, "This year we'll have to buy wheat." They were

deadly serious. "Buy it, with what money? With that of the padrone. And where is he supposed to find it?" And thus, instead of a step ahead, things were going backward. They had taken their time to sow; they had put off to tomorrow what they should have done today. They hadn't wanted to plow in the dog days of summer, then when the rains came, with the oxen sinking into the clay halfway up their legs, only a little bit of plowing had been finished, and the seed had been scattered trusting that God would do the rest. It was pitiful.

Going along the road, despite their discouragement and the uncertainty of the future, Corinna and Gherardo felt between them a harmony that brought them together as they hadn't been for some time or perhaps, in that way, ever. A simple union, plain, intimate, a calm and solid feeling, as if re-entering something natural, and not a product of the moment, or an act of will. It was like something that had always existed, as if from birth, such as the bond between brothers who even if they hate each other are still brothers. Thus it developed between husband and wife.

At the gate of the Fattoria a spectacle both ridiculous and lamentable awaited them. From a cart, the miserable household goods of a poor family on the move were strewn in the middle of the road amid a heap of broken glass. The Petrini family, father Petrini and mamma Petrini with the baby in her arms, were looking at the mess, dazed and dejected. Unfortunately time had proven Ruggero right; with all his ea-

ger enthusiasm, Petrini had not worked out. It was not really good will that he lacked, but every time he used a piece of equipment he messed something up. At the first cut of the hay, the mowing machine that had been completely renovated ended up again without teeth. No one knew what had happened, least of all Petrini, who had been driving. Whenever he took something apart, he was at a loss as to how to put it back together again. He was a curious boy: He would work furiously, in fits, as if inspired, and then fall suddenly into periods of silence, of discouragement. But on the day that he forgot to put oil in the tractor and almost ruined the engine, it became clear that it would be best if he were to go. Despite the damage he had done, to see them now, with those poor belongings strewn in the road, the little woman with baby on her hip, looking like two children going who knew where, but certainly toward new miseries because it was clear that they were the kind who never learn, one could not help but feel compassion for those poor helpless, hopeless waifs.

They helped in reloading chairs, pots, and those miserable things people have, that at home one doesn't notice but in public seem shameful; and they watched them go away. "Good luck, Petrini." Petrini had some good quality, infantile, that attracted people to him, made them feel his pain. The damage that he did was always because of wanting to do too much. Willingness isn't enough, thought Gherardo with sadness. "Poor, miserable wretches," said Ruggero, in

what seemed almost an epitaph marking their passage into the unknown. But, passing before the windows of the poor rooms next to the tower where the Petrinis had lived, Ruggero noticed that all the glass was missing. "You see, we treat them well, we take pity on them, and then they take off with the glass."

If he could have avoided discussing it, Gherardo probably wouldn't have feared the coming of the due date so much, trusting as he did in his brother. But Mastiani apparently took pleasure in keeping the subject alive, if only to caution him with discreet allusions: "What luck," he said, for example, "that those promissory notes are in safe hands; otherwise it would be a pretty mess, considering the way things are going nowadays."

But one day, when together they were looking over the accounts of the first ten days of June, noting how the expenses were gradually increasing, and before they had even begun to talk about income, Mastiani suddenly closed the books, and leaning forward on his elbows, said: "If I were you, I would sell;" he stared at Gherardo intently. Gherardo, appalled, waited. "Don't you see, by now you're in so deep that you can never get out. You started off in too much of a hurry, too many ideas; you were shooting too high. By now it's as if you're tumbling headlong down a slope; the expenses will never stop. If you don't decide in time, you'll have to sell when you're in up to your neck, and then you won't get half of what the estate is worth. Right now I judge that most likely you'll have to turn to your rela-

tives again. Not to butt into your business, but you'd still be well off, and if you want land, you can buy a place that's in better shape, perhaps smaller, but more suited for you to live in tranquility." Mastiani's blessed frankness: his tact could hardly be more delicate. There was this to be said for him, that he helped Gherardo clarify his own real motives: a place in better shape, where he wouldn't have to do anything, to struggle, and perhaps to suffer, would certainly not be for him; he might as well have a portfolio of income stocks.

"Then there's another thing. If, God forbid, your brother — you know that a businessman also can have a need to raise cash in a hurry — should sell off those promissory notes, it would be a serious matter."

As if Mastiani had been a prophet, within a few days Gherardo received a letter from his brother advising that he had had to cash the promissories. He hoped to, rather he was almost sure of being able to buy them back at their maturity, but there were so many uncertainties that he couldn't guarantee anything, and Gherardo should be prepared; one never knew.

That same evening in the office, seeing him preoccupied, Mastiani had offered:

"Why not sell to your brother?"

"But, he has just written that he has no money, that he too is in a difficult situation."

"Just a passing difficulty. It happens, you know, to a businessman. But if you made him a serious proposal,

I'm convinced that he wouldn't refuse. Between brothers. . . ."

"But how do you know?"

"It was obvious that he liked it up here. So did Signora Agnes, and nobody knows how much money your brother's father-in-law has." His admiration for that money was boundless, overpowering, like a true, real, irresistible living force against which one could not resist.

Gherardo did not discuss the matter with Corinna; there's always time to tell bad news. Every so often Ruggero let fall some careless phrase: "Since your brother was up here the superintendent has changed his tune," or "I don't know, but the superintendent must have some plan; he received a letter with handwriting just like you've received. Look, I saved the envelope from the wastebasket . . ."

But not even Ruggero's slyness pleased Gherardo, even if it meant , at least for the moment, that he was on his side. He felt rising around him a web of deceptions, while he, at the center, was impotent, or rather, no longer had the will to react.

XXIII

On the day of Sandro's arrival Corinna couldn't stay still; after breakfast she had a horse saddled and took off for Montorsaio. The day before, Count Geminiani had come to let her know, or perhaps as much to give vent to his joy mixed with apprehension. He didn't want to stay; he had too much to do, to organize. In spite of his nervous energy, his agitation, his apparent need to keep busy, even if it would have been difficult to explain in what way or to distinguish the signs in his face or in his movements, he seemed to have aged a bit.

Sandro had been in the high mountains, taking a cure for an obstinate bronchitis. Now he had improved and the doctors had reluctantly permitted him to come to the country.

Montorsaio was always open to family visits, but there was lots of extra coming and going that distinguished that day from the rhythms of other days, more to please the count than anything else. He had left Cerreta almost immediately, asking them to come to Montorsaio the next day.

The agitation had apparently communicated itself to Corinna. Gherardo watched her with a certain sad-

ness. "I'll come along a little later if I can," he responded to the invitation. Corinna hadn't insisted. Then, when she had left, he had gone on foot up to the piano behind the Fattoria.

Beyond the fields of the plain extended the Lecce-tone, the largest and roughest forest of Cerreta, covering with its violent vegetation a wild valley and two rows of hills, extending from the valley of the Rosia up over Sant'Ansano, to touch the Merse at Castiglioni. Previously, the round foliage of centuries-old ilex had majestically covered the dark slopes. After the Corporation's deforestation a rich scrub brush had been re-born, already taking on the aspect of a forest in the most fertile lower levels, while on the sides of the poorer hills the growth remained low and barren as on the Maremman shore tormented by tempests.

A path starts from Le Rocche, following the slope that dominates the valley of the Rosia, then turns up the hill and pushes into the roughest of the woods. In the teeming new vegetation, swelling young trees seemed to have erupted violently, splitting the hard bark of their trunks as they grew. From that impetuous, hostile, yet loving will to live came an acute sense of voluptuousness, like the suffering of desire.

From up there not a house nor a sign of cultivation could be seen. The valley above was closed in and seemed to have no outlet, like an alpine lake; at the point of closure, springs rose under the coltsfoot and the rushes. Falling into the valley they had dug an ever deepening channel, eroding the banks, meandering

here and there; water could be heard running in the flinty gravel. Descending along the watercourse, from the evergreen of the arbutus one became little by little surrounded by the tangled tender greenery of the plants that grew in the marshy bottom. From the bushes rose the smooth straight trunks of alders, and agile clematis ran up the shiny trunks seeking the open light above the tree crowns, where they spread out their soft foliage like a domes. And there Gherardo found the peace he was seeking: he no longer thought; he had forgotten himself; the waves of his suffering were calmed. He seemed to achieve a different equilibrium outside himself, almost a well-being. In that vast and overpowering verdure, he became a life among so many others, like a wave in the sea, a blade of grass in a field.

Dropping down by the Montecchio shortcut, Corinna found herself on the road to Montorsaio almost by surprise, as if not by her own will; it was still too early. A mile from Montorsaio, where the mule track re-entered Cerreta, she went into the forest, tied her horse to an oak and sat in a clearing from which she could see Castiglioni on the far side of the valley.

She no longer had the desire to go to Montorsaio. When she had left Gherardo in the yard of Cerreta she was not yet aware of it, but little by little as she was riding along she had felt growing within her that bitter taste, that sadness, that impotence. She had wanted to penetrate into Gherardo's thoughts, share his unhappiness: she had wanted to feel herself fill

with remorse, but she hadn't succeeded. It all remained detached from her, like a poem memorized at school that no longer made sense. And she knew that this was going to add to Gherardo's pain; if she could have made him feel that they were in it together, his burden would have been lightened.

Suddenly, on the road, she heard the sound of wheels. Along came a horse at a trot, and it was not a trap from the Fattoria; it didn't have the monotonous rhythm of a horse habituated to the usual trip and the usual driver: it could only be Sandro's little trotter. She continued to look across the valley, as if it were natural not to turn at a sound in that solitude. And a moment later she felt two hands descend over her eyes and a voice still breathless from running ask, "Guess who!"

At that touch Corinna felt herself trembling in consternation. She realized that she was experiencing one of those truly beautiful moments in life, a gift of nature and at the same time a breaking of the rules: there was a sincerity in it that was too deep not to also be sad, perhaps also wicked. She felt herself become small and light. She couldn't move, couldn't but smile at those hands that must feel, on the warm and transparent eyelids, her smile. And when, freeing her, Sandro started to laugh, she could not find in her weakened limbs the strength to respond. How he had changed! At first it seemed as if it were not even he, then, like something of value that for a moment one fears one has lost, she quickly found him again, San-

dro. That smile could be no one else's but his; that open clear gaze behind the smile was still there, where she had found such respite. But his eyes seemed larger, and the profile of his face finer, perhaps more fragile. He had also grown taller; that was what made his face appear more girlish, more feminine.

"But good God, how you've grown!"

Sandro made a gesture of annoyance. It displeased him to recognize any change. He had imagined, in Rome, that he would find everything as he had left it, that he would simply take up his former life again. Perhaps to bolster this illusion he was wearing one of the old hunting jackets that he used to wear last year on their first walks, but instead it brought back an acute awareness of the passing of time, in one of those unexpected leaps forward with which life seems to proceed, storing up in us the experiences of years, to then all at once bring those images back to us.

The sense of guilty amazement that had sometimes assaulted Corinna at the thought of Sandro dissipated in his presence. They could do no harm in loving each other in this way; it was too natural an affection, too simple and genuine. It was one of those instinctive emotions that have always existed and have no other purpose than the pleasure of feeling oneself alive. He was still a boy. She might be embarrassed at his having grown so much, yet, looking at him, it pleased her. From his convalescent pallor, from his graceful and sensitive thinness, Sandro's beauty exuded a precious quality that made him seem ephemeral, as if grace

could not rest on so sharp a peak without danger.

Sandro appeared lost in contemplation of the lines of the mountain on the horizon; he seemed to be searching the slopes for memories he had left behind, as if to take them back and grasp them one by one to his heart. When he turned to her, she felt the desire, with the submission of one who loves, to be a child again, carefree as before, like a big sister who knows how to share with her favorite younger brother her weight of experience. But now Sandro's eyes were unfocused, pale and listless, as if he were sailing in a void, and she felt anguish for him. The blooming of that adolescence, so close to her, was for her truly sacred.

With Sandro's return, Count Geminiani tried to attract to Montorsaio some other young people. He was like a mother, still young herself, who realizes that her children must live with their generation, who makes a great effort to fit in with them herself, even though it proves painful and staying with them makes her feel old. He wanted people always in the house. It was Sandro who restrained him, seeming only to be at ease with his grandfather and Corinna.

Often they ate outdoors with the neighbors. Gherardo avoided those occasions whenever he could find a good excuse, but he couldn't always refuse. He had arrived at a point where it seemed that his own defeat must be written on his face, and perhaps for this reason he had developed an increased awareness of others. That morning he had received a letter from his brother in which he announced that, in view of the

approaching due dates, he was preparing to visit : "Certain things it's best to discuss face to face." Then at the Fattoria they had told him that Bartelesi, "Foffo," had gone, or, as they put it, fled. Foffo was a good lad, and Gherardo liked him; they were a clean, tidy little family. Sometimes returning from a long walk through the fields of Causa, Gherardo enjoyed lingering on the clear grassy slope above their place, from which, looking down the gorge of Sant'Ansano, one could see beyond the mouth of the Rosia the red towers of Siena disappearing in the sunset like an enchanted city in a blue and pink haze. He had enjoyed dropping by their house, sitting and chatting around the fireplace where the paralytic old man was tucked up on the bench while Foffo's wife, a lean woman with a cameo profile who seemed still to be a girl, gave milk to a neighbor baby that Don Vanzetti, in time past, had placed with her to wet-nurse.

The small family had not been doing well. There were the old folks who could no longer do anything, and two small children; and all had to be provided for by the manual labor of Foffo. One day Ruggero had come to ask: "Should we give wheat to Foffo? He's already in debt several hundred lira."

How could one deny wheat, bread? "Look: when they get into debt then they no longer make an effort."

Gherardo had summoned Foffo, had asked him how he had ever let himself get into that situation.

The man remained silent, inscrutable.

"Look, Foffo, if you won't tell me how things are

going, what you think about it, how can I help you? You say, 'Give me grain for the winter, I'll pay for it in the spring with work.' But when spring comes, what? Then the day will come when I have to say, 'Enough.' If I make an exception for you I'd have to do it for everyone. That couldn't go on long. We'd be cleaned out, you and me both, in a flash. Isn't it better that first we look at how we can deal with this, you and I?"

Faced with the good will of the padrone, the man opened up; he had agonized over his poverty as a disgrace. There was no way to feed so many mouths from the meager wage of a laborer. Now with winter coming on it was worse, with so many days of bad weather when there was no work. In the other laborer families of the estate there were either two to work, father and son, two brothers, or they had a bit of vineyard, some little field to sharecrop, some animals to breed, but Foffo's family, how could they manage, with those babies and those old folks? Six mouths to feed every day From the humiliation and perhaps from the emotion of letting himself go, he had even begun to cry.

Since the first days Gherardo, now near so much misery, had told himself that he shouldn't give charity, that he must resist the temptation, not on principle, rigidly, but because it was almost always useless and always offensive, serving only to give a pleasant sense of merit and power to he who gave it. Any help must be more fundamental and go to the real cause of the misery. The pay of a man who works every day should be sufficient to feed his family. However, he was be-

ginning to learn from experience that to pay more was not possible; the land didn't yield enough; the work done through Foffo's effort was not worth more.

He had him change jobs. He put him to working as a hod carrier, then, little by little as he learned, as a mason; these were better-paying jobs. Foffo had dug in his heels, had wanted to go back to hoeing the fields. He was lazy about learning a new trade, but with patience and persuasion Gherardo had won. In the spring the old man died. It had been a relief for all, except for the poor old woman who remained alone to await her fate. She too would gladly have died if it hadn't been for the two grandchildren that kept her in this world with the force of their little arms. At that time they were visited by a brother of the dead man, who was working as a mason in Siena, and it must have been he who arranged for them to move to the city.

Everyone is free to do what he considers to his advantage, but why go away like this, now that he had learned a trade — leaving, of course, his debt to the Fattoria — without saying anything, as if Gherardo had done him wrong? Gherardo felt that he didn't deserve it. Just the day before he had stopped to talk with them, and felt the communion of spirit that, despite the embarrassment and unpleasantness, had made him feel that so many sacrifices were worth the trouble. And then finally, up there, sending his gaze down the closed valleys of Cerreta as far as the dark massive shape of Castiglioni among the ilex, he finally felt that he was beaten, resigned to his weakness, un-

able to react. In recognizing this there was a certain bitter satisfaction.

When he finally joined the group at Montorsaio they had climbed to the clearing of the Massi, the highest pass through the hills between Montorsaio and Cerreta. From there, one slope commands the plain of the Feccia as far as the Luriano pass and the mountainous chain of the Cornate of Gerfalco, while the other opens into the narrow valley of the Ricausa, from the lower slope of Montecchio to the wild thickets of Castiglioni. The contrast between the two valleys could hardly be more startling or more complete. On one side is the spacious vista across the plain. The faraway mountains that limit it do not stop the eye, though, but rather blending with the horizon they merge into a liquid transparency. on this side, instead, the great deep and dark valley is closed on all sides to form a small region all to itself, and the two chains of high hills that enclose it present insurmountable obstacles to the flow of both water and people.

Gherardo had remained alone; the others had pushed a bit ahead, to where they could better overlook the Feccia plain, a sea of green and sun. Surely, a life confined in these woody valleys must be the reason for the uncivilised, dark nature of the people of Cerreta, for their laziness, for the difficulty in winning them over, in shaking them loose. It was understandable that they armed themselves with hypocrisy, that they didn't know how to be sincere; for centuries they had been abandoned to themselves without guidance

and without help; it was always a matter of trying to find an extra bit of bread. The fault was not theirs and perhaps not even that of the old padroni. Now that he knew by experience how difficult it was to improve their lot, he began to see that the origin of the misery was rooted in the nature of the poor and reluctant earth, and that redemption would have to await times still to come, if ever.

The only ones who can expect gratitude in this world are the usurers.

Yes, all this was true; one could even find grounds for consolation in that fatal, irreducible hostility of things; but the bitterest pill, the one hardest to swallow, was to see how his people were abandoning him now that they knew that he was in difficulty.

Suddenly, awakening him from his sad reflections, the voice of Flavia Micheli rang out next to him, silver as a bell: "God, how beautiful Castiglioni is; it's truly majestic, so dark and solitary; it really is the castle that only God knows."

Gherardo roused himself with a sigh:

"Yes, it's beautiful. And sad, like so many beautiful things."

He would have liked to eat those words. That artificial and futile phrase seemed to expose his most jealously guarded pain. At that melancholy utterance, Flavia looked at him with attentive sympathy. She recalled that her husband had told her with ill-concealed satisfaction that it was rumored that the padrone of Cerreta was in trouble, that he would probably have to

sell. "I'm sorry for him," he had said, looking pleased, "but to some extent he deserves it. These free spenders are the ones who ruin everything for the others." Gherardo felt a bit cheered by Flavia's ingenuous sympathy.

With a sense of insupportable fatigue he had to respond to the especially cordial greeting of Caprolato — that protective cordiality one uses toward someone who soon perhaps will no longer be around — and to hear from him the usual jokes that were going the rounds of the stables. The ladies set out the picnic on the ground, in a clear place under the shade of an oak. Sandro helped, and with him Paola Cennini, Ranieri's sister. She was much like her brother, but his external qualities were accentuated in her to become almost defects: thus the heavy dignity, so much in harmony with Ranieri's masculine beauty, became in the girl a sullen haughtiness that made one suffer to hear her, under an appearance of taciturn indifference, reveal her jealous little spirit. Yet her pride was a natural prerogative of her growing beauty; she carried it like a crown. Observing her, Corinna imagined that it would be hard for her one day to give herself up to the demands of everyday life, the necessities and compromises. Sandro and Paola treated each other with the careless familiarity of cousins. They had grown up together, one might say, on the two neighboring estates. Feeling that the intimacy of the two adolescents was underlain by a stronger sentiment, Corinna suffered. A union of the two beautiful youngsters would itself be

beautiful, a union spontaneous, natural, the unrestrained life forces mixing together like the wind stirring the crowns of two neighboring oaks in the forest. She didn't react to Paola's evident hostility toward her; she just would have liked to make her understand that between her and Sandro it was something different; but what? With Count Geminiani at hand there was no way that she could withdraw; it seemed that he felt the necessity to gather around the boy all those who loved him, as if to defend him.

With the hot season approaching Sandro should go back to the mountains, but he didn't even want to discuss it. Even the doctors agreed that to move him against his will would do more harm than good, considering his temperament and sharp sensibilities. And yet it was essential.

"See if you can't convince him, Corinna," the count had asked in that voice with which he knew so well how to hide his restrained anguish.

"I'll try, but. . . ."

They both knew that Corinna's presence at Cerreta played a part in the boy's obstinate resistance. They had stood in silence watching Sandro and Paola. Corinna estimated that between her and Paola there must be about ten years, uncertain years of anguish and of joy Did she envy that torment of early youth? Would she relive it? Ah no, certainly not. In how many vain leaps and in how many anguished falls would that precious purity be lost? Then came age, and calm. But the calm hadn't yet arrived for her.

Other anguishes, other joys, were coming.

"How are things going at Cerreta?" the count asked abruptly, as if turning to other thoughts.

"Not very well, it seems to me. Gherardo doesn't discuss it, perhaps not to worry me. But he's lost in thought." She listened to her own conversation with indifference, as if these were the affairs of strangers.

The voice of Micheli, who seemed upset even when he spoke naturally, made itself heard as he loudly advised Gherardo: "You should have little consideration for the peasants. You will come to realize that sooner or later they will treat you with disrespect." Gherardo's compliant manner with his subordinates had the effect of annoying Micheli like a personal affront. "They're all traitors; they cry misery to you, and when you turn your back they rob you with impunity."

Gherardo called for Count Geminiani's opinion: "And you, what do you say?"

"What should I say. . . ? Certainly sometimes what they do is upsetting; it appears that they purposely put sticks in the spokes just when you're doing something for their own good. But we must try to understand what we'd do if we were in their place. Up here it's not like down on the plain; times can be hard. I push ahead like them, the best I can; sometimes it's cloudy, sometimes clear." If one had examined in depth his way of thinking one would have seen that it was something entirely different. In the end, they were outsiders, while Geminiani was from up here, from the same culture as the peasants. The Geminianis had been si-

gnori of Montorsaio from time out of mind, and the peasant families of Montorsaio had more or less always been there; who knows but that if one really looked deeply they were all related? He treated them, in his own way, as family. Even treating them harshly, when that was needed, was another matter, between them.

In order not to abandon Gherardo to Micheli, he added: "But they tell me great things of your projects. I hear that you've doubled the number of farms. Cerreta had need of someone like you."

"Too much work," said Gherardo. "I've been in too much of a hurry"

"That's for sure," underlined Micheli pointedly.

"And when one has started, stopping is difficult. It's like a wheel that's difficult to budge, but that once in motion pulls everything along behind it until. . . ."

"Until the final stroke," concluded Micheli with satisfaction.

"Don't believe him," said Geminiani laughing. "The land will make you suffer terribly, it will be slow to pay repay your efforts, but it's honest; in the end you'll get it all back. If it weren't for the land, what would there be that remained honest in this world? You just need patience, patience. . . ."

Suddenly Gherardo felt Corinna's eyes on him, but he didn't wish to raise his own. These people, Micheli, these discussions, day after day. She was right. He didn't see her face, but her upper body, erect, against the sky, between the trees. Her body was so slender, still so young.

XXIV

As the gray light of early dawn filtered through the blinds, Gherardo looked at Corinna's slight body next to him under the covers. It seemed like a thing somehow absent, distant, inanimate. In himself he felt the coldness that follows defeat, when a lapse of time has passed between ourselves and the first shock of pain, as if we have been separated from our body, leaving it cold with a new, intense chill; the pain exists and is always present, but is no longer active in us, can no longer be measured.

He had no clear idea of exactly what had happened; it was as if he didn't want to know. Certainly he would soon have to make a decision, providing circumstances didn't make it for him. There was a fixed deadline; his last resources were being consumed; his beautiful furniture sold, the paintings as well; he had held back only the Giovanni di Paolo as if through superstition; as if in some way that he couldn't imagine Cerreta would remain his — full of red ink, burdened with mortgages, but still always Cerreta, as if he couldn't imagine life without Cerreta. What a strange thing, this love of the land to the point of suffering, of sacrifice; and not just land, but a land, a piece of land, his,

like a living being. His look fell again on Corinna. The pain didn't come from Cerreta; even with the agony that his land caused him, he still had the ardor to keep up the fight.

Corinna slept with her head on her arms; in the night she must have thrown her pillow aside. Her hands were clasped together above her in a tension that made her appear taller. Her face was hidden between her arms; Gherardo couldn't see, but nevertheless felt, the attentive closed face of a child in sleep. She was an inert creature, separate from him. Blind as he had been to anything that was not part of his work, it seemed that he had never been aware of the change that was growing between them, that only now appeared unexpected and irreparable. Surely he had always been aware of it as a subterranean current, even if he had not wanted to face up to it.

Like one of those inexorable sights that from time to time in the normal flow of life bring us face to face with the presence of death, visions that come back to us in quiet moments, thus now he saw his age coming to face him and separate him permanently from her. How could he earlier have thought otherwise? Rather, he hadn't wanted to think about it. Certainly his spirit was still fresh and vigorous, open to youthful enthusiasms, and even capable of feeling more strongly, more deeply than before. But his face was already taking on a different character, more energetic, stronger, but also coarser. The signs of age were almost imperceptibly creeping up. She, on the contrary, was blooming

anew, with a more intense beauty, more pronounced, as if she had discovered some element that before had been missing. She was more lissome, slimmer. And that new ardor of the senses, of which he was a little afraid, as if it might be his fault.

"You, becoming like Micheli?" How such an idea had made her smile. But considering the convoluted correspondence between the physical and the emotional, those signs of the flesh would some day be evidenced also in the spirit. It was fate.

Giving of oneself, lifelong abandonment of one person to another, taking over someone's life for oneself alone, what a risk. Perhaps he had been moved just by a desire to know her, to fill her with himself, if only for a moment. But with what right had he taken for himself that young life without trying to find a way to let it grow, constraining it to his own purposes, plunging it suddenly into the serious cares of life, into its difficulties?

He thought of Sandro and Corinna, how beautiful they were together. One could not connect anything bad with the thought of them. The inspired tenderness that arose in her when near Sandro was so simple, so natural. He himself enjoyed the light that radiated from youth and the illusion of its durability. One felt the life peeking out, hesitant, on the point of opening. Sandro's movements were always a surprise; they had a grace that previously had not existed; in every gesture there was an act of creation. His smile appeared freshly born, like the opening of a flower bud. Tricks

of nature to guide its creatures, to appeal to them, mold them to its will, which is always one only: love. And already, before they recognize it, before they can enjoy it, to let them wither.

How to give a name to Corinna's feelings? But then, why try to define feelings? They are changeable and indefinable as clouds; one cannot grasp them, it seems one doesn't have the right. Was he himself able to define what he felt for her, among those painful images that ran through his mind between sleeping and waking? The attraction to Sandro's adolescence that she experienced was among the mysterious forces of nature; to prevent it would be like wishing to push the waters of a river upstream. Of one thing only he felt certain: she was honest and sincere, otherwise he would have seen her change, like looking into himself. What would be the value in knowing? One can't create feelings, mold them. The very innocence of that creature that lay beside him innocent, defenseless, seemed to tell him: one can't. Carefully he got up and closed the shutters through which the sunlight was beginning to filter.

Dropping down to the Filicaie, into that deep valley in which they had placed so much hope, instead of the pride of accomplishment and success that had once animated him, he now found in everything the signs of his impotence and, worse, the certainty that he was useless, perhaps even harmful. The wheat was maturing, growing yellow, but its motion in the wind was not the deep waves of fertile plants, where one

could sense the weight of the grain and the compactness of the stems as they resisted the air, moving like a single continuous material. In the sloping fields the grain was sparse and infested by weeds; in the level fields it was more uniform, but stunted, short, parched, as if it would wither before maturing.

Descending to the fields as if merge himself with into their misery, to make it more his own, he glimpsed in the shade of an alder, hidden in a thicket of saplings, a plow. In assigning the mechanical plows to the peasants he had required that they take responsibility for them, that they repair them after use; he knew that one of the causes of their failures was not taking timely care of tools. So! They had found a solution: hide them. It was probably more trouble to hide them than to fix them, but what mattered was to not obey the pdrone.

From below came a song; it was Bello's voice. In the shimmering waves of heat that rose visibly from the earth the infinitely sad and resigned melody seemed the true voice of nature. Gherardo calmed; maybe men like Bello were like the poor sheep whose breed he had fruitlessly been trying to improve. The best breeding stock died of thirst in summer and hunger in winter, while those seemingly miserable cross-breeds that just hung onto life by their teeth survived, resisted the privation. That's the way it was with everything; this land could produce only this kind of man, without exception. As he neared, he could distinguish the words:

Oh my lost one, when your eyes closed
I tried to reopen them with my tears.
Now, in the graveyard, I kneel at your tomb,
Where I will lie beside you.

Suddenly the song was interrupted and a scream pierced the air. Gherardo hurried his pace and, at a bend in the path, found himself confronting Bello holding up a boy by the collar of his jacket and beating him with his belt. The boy tried to throw himself to the ground as if to disappear into a furrow, the man raised him bodily and continued to beat him, now here now there, clutching the thin little body. Running, Gherardo shouted, "Are you crazy? Are you trying to kill this creature?"

Bello turned abruptly. The boy tried to escape, but Bello held him by the jacket and threw him to the ground: "Stay there," and turned back to Gherardo. The accumulated resentment between the two men gripped them hard as if finally it must end in violence. At Bello's feet lay the hay scythe. Gherardo was unarmed, but felt strong enough to break the scythe with his bare hands. Calm with that feeling of power in his blood, he sat on a pile of stones and asked: "What has that boy done to you?"

From a broken flask in a furrow a puddle of wine flowed. In carrying it on a run to his father the boy must have stumbled and fallen with it. In the flush that was inflaming his veins Gherardo felt with a sense of immense liberation that the bitterness, the discouragement, that had been weighing him down had

slipped from his shoulders, that his life, his work, Cerreta, Corinna, no longer counted: that which counted was the attention of every faculty on this man who was facing him, gathered like a wild beast for the attack.

In that moment, he was struck with a flash of recognition, a comprehension of how his disillusionments mocked him, the condition of Cerreta's fields, the looks of the men: in an instant it passed; he felt secure, above it all, able even to smile about it.

As if Bello had sensed all the weakness and renunciation there had been in that instant of recognition, over his face passed an intense look of scorn. Gherardo felt genuine surprise: he couldn't imagine that this brute could have intuited so much; it didn't occur to him that he was facing the sharpened instincts of the beast ready for battle, facing its prey. But with an infantile joy he felt that he could count on the force of his will, rigid and flexible at the same time, like a blade. Bello seemed to be studying how to jump him without confronting that will that faced him.

The child had ceased crying, had found in the dirt a piece of bread stained with wine and had started to munch on it. Gherardo deliberately turned his back and started to return slowly toward the road. When he reached the hedge, he called his dog. Only then did Bello shout:

"You'd better watch out."

But one heard in it the recognition of a superior force.

Walking along, the burning heat of his blood cool-

ing as the shadows invaded the valley, Gherardo felt the calm that had protected him transmute itself into the security of resolution. Something in him had reached a decision, though he didn't yet know what. And at the same time something in him had changed, permanently.

He had arrived at the Filicaie; passing the river, he advanced into the woods. He was reminded of an evening in the first days when, returning from Castiglioni, he had imagined himself lost in the woods. It had been getting dark, as now, and the solitude of the forest around him had appeared inviolable, sacred; it had left in him a sense of religious awe and at the same time of great happiness. Now the woods no longer seemed mysterious. Now he was measuring the height of the saplings, of the shoots, reckoning how much they would bring, in money, when cut. Every hidden beauty, every sacred secret, remained under the greedy tyranny of the land that held man in slavery, held him to hard work that didn't always provide a return.

As he emerged at the divide, the tower of Cerreta, rising still red from the reflection of the setting sun above the ilex that enclosed it, majestically dominated the landscape, like a castle in the air. How much poetry, how many illusions had he vested in those antique stones that were collecting the last gleam of twilight? Suddenly, as the sun dropped below the hills beyond Selvalta, the tower became leaden from top to bottom. In the dark air an automobile horn sounded. He imagined someone in the automobile, as they sped

up the road from the Rosia gorge, condescendingly pointing out the houses of Cerreta nestled up there in the dankness of the ilex: "Poor people, removed from the world." And a peasant, stopping in his work, following with his gaze the rapid trail of dust up the curve of the rise: "They go free like the swallows, and we stay here nailed to these clods, for all of our lives." And perhaps Corinna was leaning out from the piazza of the villa toward the valley, following the vehicle as it climbed over the mountains of Cerreta to cross toward the sea and then down toward Rome, by now as small as a toy, disappearing like a vain hope of liberation. And perhaps that urge to call to them, to have them carry her away too, toward some destiny where people live, where they feel themselves alive, before it's too late.

At the villa, before entering the house Gherardo felt himself irresistibly attracted toward the Fattoria. He entered the office to find Mastiani placidly drinking a cup of coffee, as usual at that hour. Then, as if it were not he speaking, as if the words were born who knows where and he was only the spokesman, with a careless, absent tone that filled him with wonder, he said: "I have become convinced that considering your capabilities, the breadth of your ideas, this is not an appropriate position for you. I wish you to turn over as soon as possible your duties to foreman Ruggero. What you need is a large operation, where you can utilize all your intelligence. Up here, among these woods, you're wasted."

Mastiani, who had risen mechanically and quickly glanced at his books, fixed him with a look of incredulous surprise in which Gherardo felt he could distinguish an air of condescension. At first he couldn't find words. But when Gherardo moved to leave, Mastiani made a gesture to hold him back: "But wait at least until next month, when the promissories come due. It could be that then . . . I don't know: I could be useful to you, more than you think. With your brother . . ."

Gradually his tone was becoming more relaxed, recovering from the surprise; his usual self-confidence returning, taking the upper hand: "I have a certain influence. And also now, certain things . . . Then, can you depend on Ruggero? I would think twice. These people up here, good people, but . . ."

"What will be will be," said Gherardo, tired, "I'd rather be alone." He closed the door as he left. But the warm satisfaction at what he'd done and his reaction to it, quickly abandoned him. Going down the corridors of the villa, he surprised himself wondering whether he had created another padrone. "Turn over the duties to foreman Ruggero." — it had sounded false even as he said it. The old doubt took over again, one of those more difficult to sort out, to clarify. Had it been Ruggero, with his subtle tact, who had pushed him along this road, to make him act in this way? A hundred insinuations entered his mind, disconnected remarks that now in this light appeared to be little prods; ah, Ruggero had gotten what he wanted. And he had arrived there without even suggesting it.

XXV

Perhaps the cruellest part of Corinna's life, more than the tension between her and Gherardo, was the mute and wary hostility of Sandro's mother. But if she passed several days without going to Montorsaio, the count would come to fetch her, and reprove her for not having compassion for them. Then, when she and Sandro were together, they would be left alone, but the thought of his mother was always present.

They often ventured in the gig along the roads of the estate, meeting peasants with their carts, shepherds with their flocks. Slowly summer's fullness gave way to the serene resignation of autumn. In their dryness one felt the hills sighing, as if suffering, in their desire for rain, for relief. The green leaves of the oaks had prematurely stiffened and paled to a dried-out yellow. Nowadays the woods were off limits to Sandro; wandering in the thickets was no longer permitted. Once, however, as they passed the path leading to the chestnut grove where they had met Virginia and Rocco the year before, Sandro insisted on stopping. They tied the horse to a tree and entered the forest. Sandro had again found a happy energy, light as the froth of a sparkling wine; he went ahead in haste,

pulling them through the brush. But at a grassy hillock Corinna wanted to stop to catch her breath.

They sat side by side; as if tired, Sandro put his head on her lap and closed his eyes. Looking at his face below her, an unexpected softness invaded her, like a wish to cry. She wished they could stay there forever. "You remember that storm?" With closed eyes Sandro nodded. "How you were soaked!" Suddenly a thought came to her: "Who knows, maybe that's when you got sick." But she couldn't manage to blame herself.

Sandro didn't respond, made no sign of hearing. She would have liked to cover him with her arms, care for him and protect him, as a bird in the nest protects her chicks from the swoop of a hawk. When she was alone with him she completely forgot the uneasiness that his mother's presence, or even Gherardo's, could cause her. There could be nothing wrong in their relationship — he a boy, she a woman, a sister — innocents. It was natural, this warmth, it was a work of nature. Sandro was the spirit of the woods, the spirit of Cerreta. Without him the lines of the hills, the thickets, the scrub, would be nothing but a landscape for her; perhaps they would become her prison. Sandro opened his eyes; they seemed to widen, the pupils to deepen. She saw him becoming pale; he appeared to be ill; suddenly she felt a sense of blame. Then his eyes closed again; his face was as white as if he had fainted. She was afraid, but didn't want to disturb him. In her distress, it seemed as if from his body, so warm in her

lap, his blood would pass into hers, bleed into her, die from her. She bent over him until her hair touched his, put her lips to his cheek. Sandro opened his eyes for a moment, gave a tremor, then remained still for a long time.

At Montorsaio, Sandro's mother looked at her in a different way: with a new resignation. The sensation of that look remained like ice in Corinna's bones for days.

Sandro relapsed, had to stay in bed for several days. Everyone wanted to believe that it would soon pass, but there was in the air a feeling of certainty, still far off, but inexorable. Then suddenly he improved; he was able to get up, sit out on the piazza, but now he no longer suggested going farther, to walk. Instead he made great plans for the spring; there was plenty of time. They put out an easy chair in front of the villa, moving it with the sun and shadows. The days were as if it had never rained, never would rain again. Sandro huddled peacefully in his chair with eyes closed, a look of well-being, of contentment, on his face. He rarely tried to walk a few steps; it was as if he weren't interested.

Beyond the piazza, around the buildings of the Fattoria, the usual work went on: corn was harvested, carts passed loaded with the ears; the happy chirping of women husking rose from the threshing floor. They made ready for the grape harvest, putting the vats, the casks, the wooden tubs in shape; from the open *tinaio* where the open vats were housed came the breath of

fresh humid air and a deep odor of fermented grapes. Toward evening the guards returned and came with news of the hunt. The dogs had raised a covey of partridge on a hillside; a big boar had gotten into the grapes in a vineyard and was afraid of nothing. They had put up a scarecrow with a bell that rang in the wind, but the beast had simply eaten the maple sapling from which they had hung it: "You should see its tracks, signorino, the size of a calf!" That was the best hour; Sandro came alive, even his color returned. The peasants who came to the Fattoria, especially the old ones, stopped to chat a moment with the signorino. With them Count Geminiani had taken on a new sweetness of manner, an almost feminine tenderness. But, in an unguarded moment, at rest, his features revealed a new severity, austere and impersonal, like a mask that fell away when he spoke.

With the dusk there came a chill and they would have to go in, and every day it grew dark a little earlier.

Gherardo and Corinna didn't discuss it, but the thought of the boy was constantly between them. In her an anxiety she felt a sad need to respond to Sandro's need for affection. Thus she passed from Gherardo's mute pain to the hostility of Sandro's mother to find the boy's feverish restlessness, yet she felt that she wasn't bringing him comfort but rather accentuating the illness with an obscure, unhealthy pleasure. Only Count Geminiani appeared to understand, through the humble resigned gratitude that he showed her. But perhaps Gherardo also understood.

XXVI

Amedeo took the heifers to the fair at Ponte allo Spino. There had been a lot of discussion over whether it would be best to sell the calves or the mothers. They couldn't keep all four; they didn't have enough forage to carry them through the winter. Teresa had wanted to sell the calves and wait for the cows to calve again. Amedeo was for selling the big animals and raising the calves, training them to the yoke and thus gaining a pair of draft animals that hadn't cost anything out of pocket. At the farm center it was decided to sell the cows; the calves had better breeding and gave promise of growing up to be more beautiful animals than their mothers.

The chapel at Ponte allo Spino, a poor little parish church, rose isolated in the middle of the fields on the plain of Sovicille. From afar it looked like a cottage remodeled from one of the old turreted houses still found in that countryside. The animal fair took place in the olive groves that rose gently toward the first slopes of the hills. The animals were tied to the olive trees in a circle, double file, under the branches, gray foliage brushing their rumps. The buyers, suspicious and silent, wandered around trying to look unim-

pressed, while the agents, shouting and gesticulating, brought the parties together, pulling this one back and that one forward by the sleeve, guiding them by the shoulders, prodding the animals with great knobbly canes. The Maremma oxen, with their gray coats that darkened almost to black at their powerful necks, great chest muscles and the short agile legs of animals of the heath, alternated with monumental white Sienese animals with immense arched horns, with the pure white oxen of Val di Chiesa, very tall, with small heads, tame and gentle, and with even more rustic breeds from far places.

Behind, grouped by farm, were the tenants and their foremen, seemingly relaxed and inattentive. But when the buyers passed their looks followed; it was the buyers' needs that would more or less set the day's prices.

At noon, when Amedeo arrived with his animals, people were starting to say that there was no action, that the buyers couldn't buy at these prices. With winter approaching the farms needed to sell; it was reported that there was little forage in the hills and that they had to get rid of some animals in the hope of buying again in the spring, when there would be grass; but they didn't want to take a loss. Already there from Cerreta were Ruggero, Pepi di Causa with two Maremma calves, and Fanti from the Palaces with a pair of old oxen. No one was buying. Along the road that rose toward the hill the refreshment stands began to fill with people. Here and there an agent brought

together buyers and sellers, who would draw back with shrugged shoulders and large gestures of denial. Then he would grasp the large hands of a peasant in his, and shaking them up and down, shout the ritual phrases. But few deals were concluded. There was lots of talk, as if it didn't always happen that deals were made only at the end, when the sellers were convinced that they couldn't get any more, and the buyers that they wouldn't do any better.

Around one o'clock Ruggero and Pepi went toward the village; the field was emptying. Hanging around the animals was a waste of time; things would liven up later. Amedeo and Fanti took bread from their pockets, and flasks of wine. To accompany them they bought some anchovies. They sat under a tree to eat in silence.

On the way Ruggero and Pepi bumped into Ciompi, the other peasant of Causa.

"Hey, what are you doing here at the fair?" Ruggero asked him.

"Are we so poor that I can't even stop in at a fair now and then?" answered Ciompi, joining them.

"Oh, you never miss one. The women are taking care of the farm, eh?"

In the smoky and vibrant bar, buzzing with shouts like a beehive, Ruggero stopped here and there to chat and glean a bit of news on the progress of business. To eat, instead of sitting at the foremen's table he preferred to remain with his peasants. As they were accommodated at a table at the back of the room, with

space for their elbows between the plates and glasses, looking around they saw, two or three tables further along, Anselmo, Bello, the owner of the Osteria Bianca, and Maestro, whose face was sunk in his bowl.

"Hey, there's Bello," said Ciompi.

"Bello and his gang, eh?" responded Ruggero.

That day Anselmo was inspired and, when he had finished eating and settled his elbows onto the cleared table, he began to sing. He had a vast repertoire of stories and songs accompanied by scurrilous gestures.

His songs became obscene; people were entertained, egging him on; they took pleasure in seeing his degradation. A merchant, an enormous man, was enjoying the spectacle vastly, his great belly shaking the table with the force of his laughter. He bought jugs of wine for friends and strangers, and the whole crowd of winebibbers from the fair were gathered around.

Finally the place began to empty; a few remained drinking at the bar. At the rear, at Anselmo's table, a high-stakes card game had started, serious, in silence. Ciampi joined the game; Anselmo, lying between the bench and the wall, was asleep.

From the courtyard next to the stream, at dusk, Teresa and the grandmother were watching the road, unusually busy with people returning from the fair. They were awaiting Amedeo with anxiety; it was his first fair. Teresa couldn't quiet the worry in her heart: there were so many dangers in the world for men. What if Amedeo should take after his father? If God wanted to make her suffer all he had to do was to give

Amedeo some vice; the women at home do the suffering, that's the destiny of women. But please God, not the vice of drinking.

A hesitant voice, growing stronger with the rhythm of a song, came from the house: Virginia was singing her baby to sleep. How had the little simpleton learned that bit of song? A little sob caught Teresa in the throat. Among the shrill sounds of midday, voices rose from the fields and traveled for miles.

When Amedeo returned, they closed the doors and sat at the table. As usual, Amedeo had little to say. Teresa looked at his low frowning brow under the tight curls while he forced himself to tell them how he had made out with the animals, then went off once more into his usual obstinate silence. How different people could be, even those of one's own blood. But he was an honest boy, Amedeo. Better thus, hard and uncivilised, than one of those who know how to have fun at the fairs. But youth passes quickly.

They were about to go to bed when they heard a knock. Who could it be at that hour? Amedeo went to the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me."

"Who are you?"

"You hear that, eh, what a family! They don't even know the voice of the boss."

It was Anselmo. They looked at each other, appalled. And in the deep oily laugh echoing Anselmo's words Teresa recognized the voice of Bello. She

looked at the grandmother, but she didn't respond; it was up to Teresa to decide.

"What do you want?" asked Amedeo through the door.

"We're on the road, this guy and I, and it's late. We want to stay the night. Open up; am I not at my own house?" In his laugh one could hear a smoldering malignity.

At a sign from Teresa, Amedeo pulled the bolt and two men entered. Both were drunk, but Anselmo seemed more natural; he handled the wine better. Bello flopped down on the bench in front of the fireplace where Virginia usually rocked the baby and fell asleep. Virginia shrank as far as possible into a corner.

"Where do you want to sleep?" said Teresa. "We don't have any empty beds, and we women are concerned about crushing Virginia's little one."

"That one there," answered Anselmo nodding toward Bello, who was snoring on the bench, "is well fixed. I'll do as before; I'll sleep with Amedeo."

"Listen, leave me in peace. It's better for me and for you."

Anselmo looked at him amazed: Amedeo had spoken calmly, with confidence.

"Better for all! What you mean is that I'll have to sleep in the shed, or else here on the bench. A nice way, a nice welcome for the head of the family." He laughed, repeating to himself: "Head of the family!"

Amedeo looked at the floor, with his arms crossed. The women lit a candle and went up the stairs.

Amedeo followed behind them. Left alone, Anselmo sat at the table with his head on his arms. He raised it once or twice, repeating "Head of the family," shaking it as if to chase off a fly, then dozed off.

When he awoke, the candle was sputtering in a pool of liquid wax, flickering until almost out, then reviving suddenly to send out a burst of light to the walls. He rubbed his eyes, looking around; Bello was no longer on the bench, and the door was closed. Then he remembered an idea that had flashed through his mind. He took off his shoes and started to climb the stairs. From above came a little light.

The landing of the stairs gave on to the room of the women; the door was open. In the light of the oil lamp that burned before the Madonna, as it had at Castiglioni, Anselmo saw a man leaning over the bed of the women; apparently Bello had had the same idea. But how did he know about the money?

With a caution of which one wouldn't have believed him capable, his filthy hands incredibly dextrous, Bello had raised the sheet and, pushing aside the hem of the shirt, was about to feast his eyes on the nude skin, the breast, flat and hollow with the woman's supine position. Anselmo felt the presence of another person in the room; the eyes of the old woman, wide open, were watching. It was as if she were nailed to the bed, couldn't move or make a sound, could only look. Between Teresa and the old woman Virginia, huddled around her baby, was sleeping. Anselmo suddenly plunged his arm beneath the

hands of Bello into the bed, searched under the pillow, and next to Teresa's face felt the cold clasp of the wallet. But it wouldn't come loose; it was tied around her neck with a string. He took a jack-knife from his pocket. Bello followed these movements with his brutish eyes. The blade glistened, entered under the sheets. The old woman partially raised up, then with a stifled moan fell back on the bed. Teresa stirred, rolled over, and Anselmo quickly slipped the blade under the string and cut it. Only then did the old woman find the strength to move; it was the money for the wheat. She jumped up and ran through the door to the stairs, raising her arms and screaming. Escaping, Anselmo with a great shout knocked her down, while Bello, stumbling over her fallen form, tumbled heavily down the stairs after him.

XXVII

In the crystal clear September night, alive with the glimmer of fireflies that were like phosphorescent eyes, the thin irregular tolling of Cerreta's bell seemed at first like a natural voice of the forest, or of the night. Then, moved by an inexperienced hand, the bell's ringing grew more frequent, became insistent and tumultuous, like someone's calling for help without stopping for breath. Half dressed, Amedeo entered the women's room: "It's the bell of Cerreta, calling the alarm. What could it be?" The ringing continued, still more frequent and more alarming; just hearing it one became apprehensive. Amedeo said, "I'm going up." He put his *pennato* on his belt and took off in a run through the chestnut grove. When he reached the crest he stopped to look. On the hill of Siena Vecchia a great redness bloodied the sky. It was like a dawn against low cloudy skies that settle heavily on the mountains. "Fire in the Leccetone," said a voice from the dark.

Instead of dropping down to Cerreta Amedeo skirted the mountain through the brush, following a path along a wall that in the old days had served to protect the fields. Passing below the ridges which hid

the horizon from his view he could see only the sky, flushed with red: the fantastic light, in which the leaves were so clearly sculptured that one could distinguish every vein, was periodically blotted out in an astonishing deep red darkness. From the valley a light draft blew, not a strong wind. When the breeze turned along the hills Amedeo felt himself enveloped in a bitter hot smoke that took him by the throat. Reaching the crest, he could see flames over the entire mountain, from valley to valley. The incandescent line started from low down, toward Anterigoli, here advancing and there retreating, liquid and alive like a great creeping serpent, passing the divide, then falling down to the Leccetone creek at Botro degli Strulli. Amedeo ran blindly through the low brush, jumping the bushes. As the horizon became visible, in the blood-colored blaze he could see little figures of men moving with the motions of robots through the red air. Nearing, he heard their voices. Suddenly the column of smoke that rose above the flames, would roil, turn, pour back to earth; the men would drop to their hands and knees, faces to the ground, to avoid suffocation.

Burroni, who arrived from the Campora woods, suggested that they start a backfire.

"No," said Zani catching his breath, "that would burn all the way to Cerreta. This breeze from the south could carry it as far as Rosia. If there were the right wind, I would be with you; but now what we need to do is to clear a strip across Poggio al Santo

about fifteen meters wide, as far as the bottom lands of the Ontanelli, where there's more moisture. If it gets up to Poggio al Santo, goodbye; who could stop it then? Let's go, boys."

They spread out, starting to cut. By now there were thirty. Every so often the older men advised on which direction to take the clearing. At the point nearest them the fire was perhaps a hundred paces away. The flames moved rapidly forward at the edge of the heather and in the low dry thickets, as if by caprice or to pursue a fleeing prey; the green arbutus sizzled and growled. The fire bypassed them, slowing a bit, then brightly illuminated an oak sapling, then a cluster of chestnut suckers as it overwhelmed them. Little red greedy mouths leapt up the slender trunks and with a crackling roar invaded the leafy crowns: the flames would blaze merrily, then descend again to the deep red lingering at the base of the trunk, and the now skeletal trees would shake the stumps of their bare branches in the wind.

"Here's the padrone," said Valori.

With Gherardo came the men of Cerreta. They went methodically to work. Pasquale, Ruggero, and Menciatti placed the men in a row, lining them up, spacing them. With a pennato, Gherardo persevered on the hard trunk of a half dry rowan. "Don't bother with that, padrone," Pasquale advised him. "If it were only the high trees it would be easily controlled. We need to cut down the low brush, the heather; in those the fire spreads quickly and then it can't be stopped."

The work took on a regular, stubborn rhythm. As the clearing progressed, a wide denuded swath could already be seen snaking through the black of the brush. It was as if the men were intent on the usual work in the woods. They brought the undergrowth down with the pennati, then piled the branches on the side towards the fire; it seemed as if they wanted to feed the fire, to reinvigorate it. "When the fire arrives at that pile," explained Pasquale, "it stops to burn the brush; beyond it's clear. The fire burns straight up into the air; that doesn't scare us. It's the fire that creeps that can go for miles."

Every so often gangs of men arrived. They came from all parts: from Camporedalda, from Poggio, from Le Cetine, from Montarrenti. Now came the people from Montorsaio. Missing were those from the valley, from Montecchio, from Anterigoli, from Casanova; if the fire was not stopped, their houses would be threatened.

At a change in the wind the smoke, turning down toward the ground, overcame the line of men. A burning wind suddenly illuminated the work with a fearful clarity; burning sparks fell into the cleared area.

Then the wind eased a bit; the fire slowed, held stationary. Men could breathe again. Now they could hear a roaring in the valley, like an immense fireplace. "Here's the signora padrona," said Ruggero. Corinna was standing a little behind them on a hillock.

"It's going better now, padrona," said Menciatti, looking around. Above them they were surprised to

see the star-filled sky. But suddenly they heard the whining of a great gust rise up from the valley among the chestnuts, and a wave of suffocating hot, smoky air besieged them. They had to back off, blinded. The heat suddenly became oppressive in the red unbreathable air that seemed as if it might burst into flame. They could no longer see anything. From her knoll, Corinna saw down below, at an angle across the line of the fire, a heavy mass of smoke: "Gherardo, I think that the fire's also coming from there."

Ruggero and Menciatti ran back toward her. As soon as he was on the knoll Menciatti warned: "It's here behind us, Pasquale; if it gets out, we'll be caught between two fires and have to escape. And then we'll save nothing. We have to get behind it. Courage, boys." Between Casanova and Anterigoli the smoke was increasing.

A hundred silent and determined men went down with Pasquale, as a patrol enters a skirmish in a battle. From the knoll the voice of Menciatti guided them: "The fire is low beneath you. You can't see it. Now it's starting to climb, getting around you. Start clearing along the creek. Right, like that, quickly. Now it's coming up slowly; I'll tell you in time what to do."

They started again, in order, with that rhythm that no urgency and no danger seemed able to speed up or slow down. Gherardo came also; Corinna saw him shiver as if he had taken cold in that chill that comes before dawn. She felt on the verge of tears.

From the valley rose the mooing of the cows that

had been led out of their stables.

"Down a little more, a little more, boys," warned the voice of Menciatti. "If you can manage to get to the chestnut grove it won't get any farther. Try to go up toward Campora; the fire is turning; careful there, now. The danger is there." Gherardo picked up his pennato and moved toward them: "Keep at it, boys."

"Keep at it, boys," echoed Menciatti; "To the top of the hill. If we get there first, the fire can't get by."

It was a race between the men who were cutting above and the fire working around the base of the hill to catch them from behind. Toward the base, where there was more moisture, the brush was denser: the men made less headway in their cutting, but also the fire met more resistance.

"But how did it ever catch down there in that bottom?" suddenly asked Pasquale as if coming out of some internal debate.

Now they were cutting in earnest. With every blow of a pennato fell saplings of ilex, oak, birch, all the young life that Gherardo had counted on to revive the beauty of Cerreta's forests. The smoke became denser, stronger, smoldering within the flames.

Beyond the valley of Castiglioni the sky was beginning to lighten. The outlines of the mountains separated, the slopes regained their forms. The first diffuse light seemed far away and indifferent to the inferno that was pressing them. Suddenly Pasquale sniffed the air: "The wind seems to have changed." They all raised their heads to look.

The wind had stopped; the clouds had become white and puffy and drifted slowly toward Castiglioni. It was shocking, now that the smoke was clearing skyward, to see how close the fire had come. The curtain of smoke rose straight and compact, then swirled into oily gray tangles and suddenly broke apart to scatter and dissipate toward Castiglioni. A mass of cool air descending from the Poggio al Santo made them shiver with pleasure. The smoke turned and flowed toward the emptiness of the valley in a mountainous wave, as if to fill it. Tongues of flame leapt greedily down below, moving downward. "That's enough, boys," shouted Menciatti. But they had already stopped and were standing, watching.

The smoke spread in the valley in layers; from above, forms stood out on the slopes, bathed in the cold light of dawn. They could distinguish the rocks, the plants. The clouds opened; as they rose they dissipated and great patches of blue came together through the last mother-of-pearl mists, trimmed in gold by a dawn that had not yet reached the earth. At the mercy of the north wind the fire was retreating, little flames flickering here and there on the black earth already devastated by its impetuous rush, tormenting and retaking what had been missed in its passage by falling on any new, intact thickets. A hundred patches smoked in the black waste. At the edge of the chestnut grove an old chestnut with a trunk empty as a tube moaned as flames could be seen still consuming its interior. Suddenly it staggered and fell to the earth, shat-

tering in a great flash of sparks and embers. Here and there remained the black skeletons of trees. At the top of the mountain, a group of three pines, possibly surviving from some ancient planting, still burned like torches. Now the entire burned zone was exposed, bordered below by a wavy fringe of green and above by the stripe of the clearing that had contained the fire.

The men gathered together, discussing the fire. "But how could it have happened?" asked Gherardo joining them, shaking off his mental fatigue.

The men stayed silent. It seemed they were hesitant to answer him. In the golden air of the early dawn the valleys, invaded by great rhythmic shadows and zones still red hot, seemed to re-enter into their eternal forgetfulness.

Since Gherardo's question remained suspended without response, Menciatti hazarded: "The woods are so dry now, what can you expect, almost anything can start a fire. Up in that leafless heath that dries like fag-gots with the first dry spell, a fire can quickly take hold, run with the wind, and never stop. But the forest is harder to burn."

Here he stopped with surprise at having said so much. Gherardo insisted: "Exactly, but how did it take hold there in the valley, where it's moist, almost marshy?" No one responded, but in that silence one could almost hear the suspicious take courage.

"True," responded Menciatti dryly. The silence was heavily prolonged, like those moments of tranquility before a storm when the earth, rigid with quiet inten-

sity, seems to prepare itself to receive the ire of the elements that is about to rage. In that moment Pasquale returned from down in the valley. Some of the men hastily moved apart, as if they had been caught plotting among themselves. The guard had to notice; on his frowning face a grim smile broke out, then he said:

"The fire was set. In the thicket between Anterigoli and Casanova. There are burned bunches of faggots, separate, spread out for a hundred paces." It seemed that everyone already knew this; they avoided looking at him.

"There is also some news from Bello's half-witted wife. She says that since the fair at Ponte allo Spino she hasn't seen him at all. She hasn't seen anyone and there's no way to get anything else out of her."

The men had formed a circle around the group from the Fattoria, as if waiting for something to happen. Ruggero then said in a low voice:

"Someone else has flown the coop too, Anselmo of Sant'Ansano. It would have been better if he had never come back."

"Ah, him too? Who told you that he's missing?"

"He's another jailbird, that one," said Ruggero, ignoring the question. The men were looking at the opposite slope. From Boscogrosso and from the Spianate dei Massi, the thick brush extended and was lost to view up by the hills of Montorsai. It was an entire region covered with brush; it gave a sense of the sea, of the infinite. In one night, following the game trails,

one could cover ten miles, pass from one region to another. The forest extended uninterrupted from Volterra to Grosseto; a man in there could hide like a wild animal. Without looking at anyone, Gherardo rose. Nausea invaded him; perhaps it was the stink of the burn on an empty stomach, perhaps the fatigue that, with the excitement of the fight over, he was beginning to feel; perhaps it was an even crueler weariness that pressed his chest and left him breathless. The men divided in silence to let him pass.

XXVIII

The sense of temporariness — of necessary and imminent change — that hung over them contrasted with the astonishing calm of their evenings. Slowly it was becoming autumn, already October and turning cool, but still mild enough that the fresh air felt good to breathe. To go to bed seemed to disdain the grace of God; they would stay long in silence on the terrace. The valley of the Rigolenso filled with the moon, cold and gleaming like metal. One evening in the encompassing quiet Gherardo was enjoying the feeling of physical fatigue taking over his limbs, invading his thoughts, winning over the gentle resistance of his eyelids. Then from the mountain across the way two floodlights appeared, seemingly seeking who knew what in the sky, then suddenly dropped, violently invading a strip of woods. Around a curve came the roar of an automobile, clear, suddenly close.

“It’s the car from Montorsaio,” said Corinna. “Sandro is worse.” For some days, as if in fear of what they already knew, they had not been to Montorsaio.

But everyone knew, except he himself — the count, who with agonizing strength of will tried to persuade himself that it wasn’t possible — that the end hovered

over the boy, very near. But as much as we may expect it, we are always stunned by the apparent speed with which such conclusions finally arrive.

The great eyes of the headlights grew larger at every curve. Getting out of the car in the driveway, the foreman confirmed their fears: "The signorino is worse. The count has sent me to see if you, signora, would be willing to come. If you could see, signori, the state of the count. He said: 'Tell them that a desperate old man has sent you.'"

Gherardo helped Corinna into the car, closed the door: "Go ahead; I'll come later."

Silently the machine rolled down the curves of the hill, then roared strongly, attacking the uphill climb. In the reflection of the headlights appeared now a thicket of ilex, now the foliage of olive. Suddenly a hare leaped out and for a little ran in great confused jumps in the glow of the lights, then fell back into the darkness. They entered the Montorsaio road; the lights striking the trunks of the oaks along the roadside invested them with the instantaneous mobility of gigantic apparitions. These visions captured all of Corinna's attention; she couldn't take her eyes away for an instant, as if it were of extreme importance that she store away their indelible memories. In her blind anxiety to reach the boy, the rows of trunks that flashed by, swallowed by the night, took on the dismal, heavy rhythm of a nightmare. In front of the villa a silent crowd opened to let her pass rapidly. She walked through rooms and veils of subdued murmurs. People

seemed to make way for her as if they thought she might be bringing a message, or a cure. The guard went ahead, guiding her.

She entered a room where she had never been before, saw him immediately in a bed facing the door. Sandro, without moving his head, smiled. After the hubbub of the outer rooms, here all was silence and contemplation. As if it were a natural, expected thing, Corinna felt that the spirit was leaving her to take refuge in him.

Raised on pillows, Sandro was breathing oxygen that whistled softly from a regulator. On the two sides of the bed his mother and the count held his hands. On her arrival they moved aside a little; she crept forward along the count's side of the bed. How warm was Sandro's thin hand between hers, still chilly from the outside air.

She bent over him far enough for him to feel her breath on his cheeks, where two small red blotches tinted his pallor. His face seemed sharp, pointed; on his brow and over his lips were little pearly drops of sweat. He seemed to nod, to let the shade of a smile cross his resting features. She felt the force of a gaze behind her. She encountered the eyes of the count, and he quickly averted them, frightened: when he turned back to her she saw them open to the hope of a miracle, then clench again like the numbed hands of a person drowning. Yet Sandro was calm, almost indifferent, detached. It was as if he were aware of the change that was coming, of a force that was enveloping

him, without separation and without suffering.

She raised her eyes from the bed. It seemed impossible to come back into ordinary life, where women came and went busily taking care of things, where at the window the doctor was looking out into the night through the glass. At the head of the bed stood a priest, imposing in his violet surplice: it was Monsignor Paolo Geminiani, the count's brother.

It couldn't be true that he would die; how could they be so sure? Sandro's hand withdrew from hers; he had closed his eyes, appeared to be dozing. The doctor approached, took his pulse. The hubbub of the people in the courtyard below could be heard distinctly. The breathing of those who surrounded the bed was broken by pauses, by little gasps, sometimes stopped in a sigh. Sandro reopened his eyes, looked at one after another as if making an effort to recognize them, struggling with fleeting memories. His breathing became more strained, more difficult, struggling for air. The mother held a phial of medicine, tried to give him some; the doctor watched her in an absent way, with a certain distracted interest, as if seeing her doing a curious thing. But the boy's mouth seemed to have forgotten how to open; the spoon bumped against his teeth with a clicking of the metal and spilled on the sheet. The count's eyes widened; at that look Corinna leaned over the face of the boy until she could feel his breath. The mother leaned out eagerly as if to carry away that breath and she seemed to hear words which at the time she didn't understand but that she recalled



later, unsounded words formed in his breath: "Mama, I'm all right." A slight spasm like a heartbeat shook his gaunt chest; it seemed to beat also in his pulse. The mother stood upright and raised his head that had bent backward between his shoulders and composed it on the pillow; then Corinna realized that she had seen him die.

Gherardo had stayed a long time in the courtyard bathed by the moon, alone before this event that filled him with incredulity and shock, the agony of that young man.

He would have liked to set aside the people, the love that surrounded Sandro, his grace, all that had made him singularly precious, and to consider and abstractly measure the cruelty of this crime of nature against itself, the death of an adolescent. But it wasn't possible; he was suddenly reminded of so many occasions with Count Geminiani and his boy, doubly his son. What cruelty for those who remained. It was not like the pain of the ewe from which the lamb has been taken, that hour of bewilderment, of search, before returning to browsing. Man remembers, lives on memories. Man has a life to carry out, a work, and never stops loving. And yet one must learn to consider death as a natural thing, and not to hold a grudge against God, against nature, against whatever it is that gives and takes life. As he stood there, the fact that the life of man was similar, even identical, to the lives of animals and, in a way less obvious but simpler, of plants, struck him with an elemental, fundamental brutality.

But in that concept he dimly felt that he had found in man a new innocence, a deeper sanctity of life. Man is part of the natural cycle of life in which nothing is lost; physical death need not cause fear. There remained the mystery of love; love of the spirit, love that gives life, and here all was clear and all was mysterious before the eternal and timorous question: "God?"

As the night arrived his agitation became insupportable. He had a carriage prepared and himself driven to Montorsaio. The night was cutting a deep wound in his being; the images of the great trunks swaying in the moonlight hung heavily over his spirit.

Sandro's body was already laid out among the flowers and candles; the count himself had cut what remained of the summer flowers, zinnias, asters, and the first white chrysanthemums. Gherardo stayed for a long time looking at the beautiful thin face of the youth, calm, serene as in sleep. It seemed that Sandro could hear him, that in some mysterious way he could communicate with them. And there was always God, that concept that he had never tried to clarify, that he had wanted to feel grow within him naturally, like a spontaneous seed, that he had hesitated to look at so as not to deconsecrate it with the eyes of doubt, of will. But surely the breath that no longer moved the lips of the boy must have re-entered into the breast of the natural life that moves in perpetual cycles on this our earth. Here was clearly death and eternal peace.

At the sides of the bed the mother and the aunt were kneeling. The mother leaned her head against the

sheets; around her other women watched over the body and prayed.

When the room had filled with people Corinna had escaped, passing alone back through the outer rooms. Suddenly she felt like a stranger. From the terrace, beyond the fields, against the sky, the mountains of Gervasco were paling in the early dawn.

She needed light, fresh air, to be able to breathe. She needed to break free of this nightmare, and not to think, ever again.

In the dark, behind her, nearby, a voice said: "It's useless, my son, you have to yield. God has given and God has taken away. God be praised. Accept your grief; you will find faith in the good, in peace." It was a soft, loving, low voice. Turning, Corinna saw two tall shadows against the lightening sky, near yet remote, turned toward the sun that was about to rise, as if it might provide the necessary word.

XXIX

The brusque friendliness of the past had disappeared from Count Geminiani's manner, and was missed. He always seemed to be busy with some job, some duty, some commitment. Gherardo would have liked to discuss matters with him, but realized that for the moment the count needed his privacy. Then gradually the count opened up: "There comes a moment in life when you see everything in a new . . . I don't know exactly how to express it, in a more elementary way. Everyone has his cross to bear; maybe one has to find a new way of life."

Then, shaking off his contemplative mood, he said, "I don't know if you're aware that I'm on the board of the Monte dei Paschi bank. I've heard that you're in some difficulty. A good word from me, do you think. . .? Would you like to come with me to see them?"

In rising, in moving, he showed a certain weariness, and in speaking certain hesitations, uncertainties, which brought to mind the prior self-confidence of old age and the warm, vibrant open tones of previous times; it was the same voice but it had blurred, as if through a distorted glass. His life went along as before, day after day, with no change in routine. They would

have liked to force his hand, get him to go off to Rome for a change of scene, but he wouldn't agree. At Montorsaio everything continued with the slow but fatally continuous rhythm of the working of the land; it appeared that nothing had changed.

At Monte dei Paschi, at the mention of his name all doors were flung wide; the director received them. "If you are expanding the number of farmsteads, this improvement of the estate is something we can study. Our experts will have a look — I see that it's an urgent matter, they can come right away. We have very precise standards; for a mortgage we can lend only a certain proportion of the value of the property. In your case it seems as if you may already have arrived at that figure. We'll have to see if there has been an increase in value through works initiated and completed. We'll calculate everything. There's also the matter of trust. Credit must also be based on the individual, his honesty, his personal qualities. That often complicates matters. But we have the word of Count Geminiani, to which we know how to give the weight that it deserves.

"My father," said the count when they were outside, as if to escape the embarrassment of thanks, "in his own way was a philosopher, and when he was involved in a complicated situation — but those were other times, life was simpler, living was different — always told me: 'When problems can be solved with money, there's always a way.' But, if you'll accept the counsel of an old man, when you've finished straight-

ening things out, go away, take a little trip. I should do that, but. . . .”

“But why not?”

“My case is different, I’m alone.” His face had suddenly hardened.

When the promissory notes came due, the refinancing, though not completely concluded, was on the right road, and it was Monte dei Paschi that worked out the settlement with Gherardo’s brother. Instead of feeling relieved, Gherardo accepted the new situation grudgingly; in his own estimation he felt as if he were sliding down a ladder. He was saved, but almost in poverty. He was in a fix; with time it could be that he would pull out of it, but in reality Cerreta belonged more to others than to him. After making payments on the loans, what remained to live on was very little. It’s true that at Cerreta living was practically free; they lived, so to speak, from the things of the earth, on the surplus. But it would be necessary to remain there. And perhaps that was fair enough; the land fed only those who lived on it. But Corinna? The investment plan carried the condition of an annual payment against the principal of the debt, as well as the interest. This gave the sense of a gradual improvement; at least it was possible to visualize a better future. But their present straitened circumstances were worsened. And Corinna, in winter, up here?

Corinna. How he must seem coarse and rough, now, in her eyes. And she herself was no longer the same; she had lost her fastidiousness in dress, the re-

finement of an elegant lady. Gherardo looked at his hands; they appeared gross, deformed, the hands of a farmer. In them it seemed that his poverty could be seen, as they say that on the face of a homicide one could see the indelible signs of his crime.

Those last days of October, crystalline and dry, like the tail end of summer without heat and vigor, seemed as if they would go on forever. Up there the wine harvest was normally very late, but that year was even later than usual; the grapes, because of the dry summer, had not matured, the skins had wrinkled while still unripe and by now were withered. The olive leaves turned yellow and the olives fell to the ground.

At midday it was still warm, with the mornings and evenings chilly, almost cold. But one day when they were in the fields of Casetta to look over the newly established plantings, they noted that the air had become still and heavy; the breath of cool marine air that had risen the evening before had slackened. Beyond Selvalta piles of gray clouds, tinged with blood by a big red sun, had appeared without them being aware and were now advancing slowly and heavily.

In these days Gherardo took Corinna with him on his rounds. She seemed to look forward to it; she avoided solitude, enjoyed being with the people. But she no longer went into the woods, which were beginning to take on their autumnal magnificence.

Descending onto the fields, going from olive tree to olive tree Gherardo looked over the young plants and saw that they were already tall; the thick gray of an

olive grove was covering the slope. They would soon be grown. With his increasing experience he felt pleasure in seeing the result that his work would produce in the far future. When he was younger he would have chafed impatiently at the agony of its slowness, of the stinginess with which the land responds to the efforts of man; the result is not in proportion to the effort. But this no longer bothered him; he had expected nothing else. Life is too short; the children will enjoy the fruits.

Suddenly a wind, low to the ground, returned to struggle with the clouds that scattered in the sky. A fat cloud was caught by the gusts, bent towards the ground. The first great drops fell, warm, noisy, onto the arid ground; suddenly it was dark. The cloud now had quickly covered the entire sky with a heavy blackness, fringed with a last wisp of blue like a frame at the edge of the mountains. There was a great roaring as of large objects rolling in the sky, a sky that had descended near the earth, far away. They ran to take refuge under the porch roof of Casetta, already assailed by a gust of rain. The farmer was already on the doorstep and invited them into the house, and was about to close the door when they saw a woman running along a sloping path against a wind that threatened to tear the clothes from her back. They waited for her, then forced the door closed against the downpour.

"In case there's hail," said the farmer fastening the window. He hadn't finished saying this when they heard the pattering of hailstones against the glass.

"For now, coming with the rain, it won't do any harm," he said after a short silence. This family, the Senesis, to whom the Casetta farm had been allocated, came from Scorgiano, in the heart of Montagnola. It had been a humiliation for them to move toward the Maremma, but on short notice they had found themselves without a farm. The new house had tempted the housewife, as the large area of land did the farmer. But they suspected that they had made a bad deal; they had always heard of Cerreta and Montorsaio as uncivilised places, lost in the middle of the forest. The violence of the wind diminished. The peasant opened the door; they all went out under the porch roof.

"This won't amount to anything," said the peasant, looking around at the sky. "It's bound to happen, the hail, in this hollow in the mountains."

The storm moved on toward Montorsaio; in the direction of Cerreta the clouds were lifting. Gherardo borrowed a big umbrella of green oilskin and they took the road to Cerreta. Passing under the chestnuts they were surprised by the mossy freshness of the air. At San Bernardino they turned and looked back; from Castelfalchi to Pian di Feccia and down as far as Gergalco lightning was striking across the whole horizon. The storm took on new force, as if, not being able to cross the wall of the highest mountains, it had turned back. They hurried toward the gate; the wind raged, furious. Before entering the house they were hit by the crashing of the first gusts of hail, then it came down dry and hard as stones.

"Did you see that, signor padrone? Goodbye to those few grapes." Ruggero had entered without their hearing him; he had a handful of hailstones big as walnuts. Gherardo went to the Fattoria with him. A little later Anna asked permission to close the shutters. Corinna had stayed at the window, her eyes fixed on the last light that crowned Selvalta. At the windows, quickly opened and closed, the violent gusts continued, like flashes of temper, voices of interrupted argument. Gusts of humid fragrance entered. When she passed nearby Anna said, "Don't you feel, signora, the breath of winter?"

Winter; winter up here. In the city now, like flocks of birds migrating, people were returning. Cafés and restaurants were filling; lights, colors, smiles; all was warm, happy. Anna lit the lamps and closed the door behind her. Corinna for some time had felt the house closing around her. To get to spring, and the sun, it was necessary to pass through the winter. Perhaps in the old days, when there were no cities, men just went into hibernation, like the plants, to reawaken in the spring. Then they had built houses, villages, cities, had found the pleasure of being together. Perhaps it was for this reason the people up here became so lazy. Why get up, be busy? There was nothing but the cold, the hard work, the boredom. Since Sandro was gone she too felt herself becoming lazy, careless, indifferent. She was no longer interested in her dress; it no longer bothered her that she didn't have things that previously she couldn't have done without. One adapts to

everything, but not without losing something that one is sorry to lose. Also she felt the loss of Sandro, and perhaps that was already becoming no more than a distant memory.

Certainly she felt that something fundamental was missing in her; or perhaps in her life as a young woman in society something had atrophied. It seemed that she could not love, not really love. It seemed that people might provoke in her a brief lively reaction and nothing more, that she couldn't think about them unless they were useful to her, aroused some sensations, and then, that's all. Thus Ranieri, thus Sandro, thus the earlier ones; now they were gone. Thus, perhaps, Gherardo. And life went on, and the earlier sensations were no longer enough. Her bored eyes fell on a phonograph, half hidden in a corner like a sewing machine in an old-fashioned bourgeois living room. She put on a record; the needle was worn and scratchy. Amid various discordant sounds could be discerned the languid rhythms of an Argentine tango. It was a disk so old, and had not been played for so long, that for a moment it took on new life. Then, after the first bars, she felt the rhythm invade her; the passionate syncopation of the nodding of her head communicated itself to her waist, to her chest, to her arms. And she started to dance alone. She felt the rhythm flowing through her skin like the stimulation of unknown caresses in her abandonment to a primitive emotion. Memories of old sensations returned, bits of her life as a girl, the warmth of bare arms, of silk, of colors, spasms of de-

sired abandon, the voluptuousness of continence and concupiscence.

Gherardo watched her for a long time before she was aware of his presence.

At the Fattoria Gherardo had talked to Ruggero about a proposal for rental that had recently come to him. Unperturbed by his dismissal, Mastiani, supported by an agricultural group, proposed to rent Cerreta. The rental that they offered would have permitted, once the interest on the loans was satisfied, a modest but comfortable life. It was a long-term deal, twenty-five years, with right of renewal.

If he were alone Gherardo would not have considered the idea for a moment, but he no longer felt he had the right to constrain Corinna to an existence that in no way suited her. She was still so young; she had the right to live her youth. Yet he couldn't imagine what he could do with himself and his time, accustomed as he was to the problems and the activity of Cerreta. Without confessing it, what really bothered him was the idea of interrupting his work, of turning it over to others.

He voiced his concerns to Ruggero: people nowadays seemed to be avoiding him, perhaps because he didn't have a flair for relationships, but also because, with the rumors that the padrone of Cerreta was in difficulties, some were thinking of leaving. It was always the same old story. But Ruggero reminded him that times were changing: people were leaving not just Cerreta; they were leaving all the estates, to go down

into the plains. Families were splitting up, the young ones going to the city to work and the old ones staying on the farms in hunger; it was the same everywhere; ask the count of Montorsaio who had three vacant farms, and there were five at Pian di Feccia where they couldn't find families. Cerreta was doing better than the others. Of empty farms there was only Casanova, which Bello had been thrown out of, but they had the promise of some people, outsiders from Lombardy, to come and look at it. It was true that since they had fired the Baronis they had not yet found a family suitable for Le Palazze, but if necessary a farm that close to the Fattoria could be handled by the padrone's personnel. They would have to remove the Valdinis, who were worse than having no one, from Poggio, and it would be difficult to find a family for that farm isolated in the woods; but somehow that could be taken care of.

"Right, but nevertheless this year there are three farms vacant. And look, Ruggero, we have to consider that I can no longer continue to spend; we will have to stop work on the projects."

"But, signor padrone, do you want to stop just now when we're beginning to see the results? By now the big expenditures have been made. If Mastiani is considering renting, it means that even he can see the benefits. Moreover you must know from experience that you've almost succeeded in bringing the estate out from under. And then, do you want to quit now that we're starting to cut the coppice woods? You'll

see when the forests of Cerreta start to pay off. Rather," he said more calmly, feeling that he had already won the battle, "in these matters of the forest, I would think twice and trust Menciatti."

Right, thought Gherardo — whom to trust? Hadn't Menciatti said that Ruggero was a sly fox? And in fact hadn't Ruggero succeeded in doing what was to his advantage, and become manager? Big boots and a sharp mind. Who can you trust? On the other hand one couldn't expect that Ruggero would support a project that put Mastiani in charge. In the end, he could depend on no one but himself. Renting, every doubt would disappear. He would know what he could count on. But . . .

To see Corinna entranced by the ecstasy of the dance was to penetrate with one blow into the heart of the truth he had been avoiding, but that, presented to him so clearly, he had to recognize that he had always foreseen.

Was it to smother her, to take away her liberty, that he had felt attracted to that overflowing youth? Did he need to have her in his possession, to force her to his rules, to suffocate her? Perhaps Corinna was unhappy because she had been unable to conform perfectly, because the renouncing of her will was not enough. Her life sought an outlet, had to find an outlet. He had used the land, Cerreta, in the same way, had wanted to transform it, impose his will on it, and it had pushed him aside, refused him, become an enemy, distant. If he had followed their natural tenden-

cies, the woman and the land, let them pursue their instincts, realize their own primitive essences, perhaps the unions would have succeeded.

The sources of good that had flowed so generously from them to him, from the woman and from the land, had filled him with such enthusiasm, such love, but not finding their true course, were now beginning to dry up. The primitive forces that he had tried to constrain and that for a brief while had seemed to be tamed, had not rebelled against his will but rather outflanked it; a wild growth, no longer contained, was retaking its domain like the weeds and the brambles in the stubble after the reaping of the grain.

Why this mania to dominate, to correct? Couldn't he recognize that the forces of nature were stronger, that they can't be constrained, that you can't push water up hill, tell the wind where to blow? To follow, to second, is possible; more is not given. But this much at least he saw: Corinna, the woman, a primitive creature, a force of nature like the water and the wind, guided by deep and essential instincts, was sacred as a tree is sacred. And one cannot with impunity disturb the course of those mysterious currents. If he had had need of consolation, of support, of good, she would not have denied him. To ask, to surrender . . . and ask, is it not like giving?

PART THREE

XXX

The motor car trilled along with elementary contentment, on its own, completely outside Gherardo's will, taking the crooked curves as if to straighten out the road, cutting them, annulling them. Dominated by a cool and rhythmic intoxication, Gherardo followed with his body the leaning of the automobile, bending like an oarsman to the strokes of the oars. Beside him Corinna, following with lively interest the attractions of the roadside, noticed in side-long glances the unconscious smile on his lips, a childish slyness that reappeared from time to time. Fascinated by the rows of thick Maremman olives, dark as ilex, which unrolled down the broad slopes, Gherardo didn't pay her any attention. He was aware only of the road, of the quivering of obedient metal that bent to his will with a supple and precise understanding, in a world of air, of space, of liberty.

They had crossed the region of the great forests, from Cerreta to Massa Marittima. Finally, beyond the

walls of that ancient city perched on the crest, the vast plain blended into a faraway blue that appeared to be sky but was sea. Cerreta had been left behind the mountains. They sped straight towards the sea.

The car swooped quickly down to the plain like a bird of prey, attracted by the straight lines, gobbling them up. On both sides the plain stretched out, vast treeless, undulating solemnly with a slow viscous flow that finally came to rest against the hills. The highway ended: before them was the sea. Here appeared a group of white houses in the sun; a grove of pines that displayed at the top their high reddish trunks the mass of their crowns in a great cloud of green. A little street wound among the houses; down below were the masts and rigging of boats and ships. The car descended irresistibly toward the sea, to stop on the edge between sand and water, as if by miracle.

A wooden shack, a broken-down bar, pushed its terrace onto the sand. They ate greedily, with an infantile enjoyment, of fish so fresh that they seemed alive. Although Gherardo in his haste to keep moving wanted to leave immediately, they wandered aimlessly a few paces on the pebbly beach. Attracted by a pile of algae that had the smell and feel of who knew what mysterious marine depths, they continued toward the pine grove. The pines died out as they approached the water's edge in contorted and tormented forms, getting smaller and smaller until they became little bushes in the sand dunes. By the time they arrived back at the shack, they had lost all track of time.

Evening found them at the water. The days were already growing shorter. With a sense of dismay they reached the end of their first day of freedom. The beauty of the sunset seemed a reproof. In the village they found a little hotel, new, pretty, almost unfurnished, walls all white, abandoned now by the summer people. They checked in, then returned to the grove. Deep in the grove, away from the shore, pines hurled themselves impetuously at the sky, filling them with astonished surprise, like finding a perfect turn of phrase which had at first seemed too lyrical but now has become natural. Vaults and colonnades opened in every direction. The moon bathed the earth in a light that seemed endowed with magic, as if by bathing the brows of human beings it could change them into fauns and grotesque demigods. Walking into open clearings they felt they were driving out an assembly of spirits and gnomes; in the shadows one could feel the breathing of crouching savage beasts, creatures half goat half human. Beyond the dunes, on the beach, on sand that should have conserved the warmth of the sun but was cool in the moonlight, they took off their shoes and went wading. They felt that they were violating some rule, risking some arcane danger. In the immense and luminous solitude their movements stirred a silver phosphorescence.

Not on the next day, nor the next, did they manage to leave, could they tear themselves away. The blissful laziness of the Mediterranean autumn was in their blood. It seemed that a blind need had accumulated in

them that had finally found an outlet, not to think, not to remember, to live only for the moment and only in the senses. October lasted infinitely. The days passed slowly until none remained. The dawns rose from the mountains behind them and illuminated the solemn sea as in a pagan rite. And they too felt pagan, Tyrrhenian, southern. They had never before known such a complete victory of the senses, a return so ingenuous, so infantile, to nature. They felt as free as the air.

Toward evening they would go to the beach, walking on the last strip of sand that was still hard from the tide. Perhaps a fishing boat would row ashore, with the sails lowered. The men would hail them warmly, laughing, from the water. They were good-looking men, with bronzed skin, hard muscles. People by now knew them and showed a shy appreciation of their obvious happiness, as if it were apparent that they had escaped from their prison.

One day they felt it was time to go. Perhaps there was a new shiver of chill in the air, a warning. They needed to break the spell, before it was broken for them. How they had changed! It was as if they had met again. But, while Corinna had abandoned herself naturally, without a struggle, to the pleasure of that physical, sensual life, Gherardo had had to fight back a vague sense of guilt, like the scruples of an adolescent. He blamed himself, or rather felt that something inside himself was blaming him, for abandoning himself to that natural unproductive but rich happiness. More

important, it seemed to him that Corinna had lost a remote, mysterious purity, and with a certain sadness he had to admit that Corinna didn't even notice, as if she had never lived in any other way.

Even her beauty seemed to have changed. She had discarded many little devices of dress, had become more natural and even more rustic; she appeared stronger, more physical, wilder. The sun had loosened her; her pace was smoother, energetic and elastic as a dance. The eyes of the men followed her naturally, admiring her body, in an envious intuition of sensual happiness, of earthy love.

Within her, Gherardo found depths of infinite animal simplicity that amazed him. He had to work to convince himself that it was only by surrendering to primitive instincts, without restriction or return, that they had again found their balance. It was as if, in his dedication to duty, to work, to good deeds, he had unconsciously broken a rule of nature, and as if that violation was in some sense his last attempt to defend a false set of principles. He felt that he had rediscovered a primitive truth that his will, his sense of duty, had hidden from him.

Thus, when he thought of the money that they were spending and had spent, money taken from — robbed from — the earth, money that would not be swallowed by Cerreta's insatiable greed, he felt that he had shaken off a degrading slavery, a brutal yoke, as if he had been relieved from eternally pushing a heavy millstone up a steep slope.

Driving south along the low coastline in the late afternoon they saw rising from the waves a walled village, golden in the sun. From a road that hair-pinned up a difficult hill they were precipitated onto the rim of an abyss, as if the car wanted to leap into the sea. The sun, a disk of fire, was dropping into a waveless sea, a sphere of jade. From an arch in the wall two buffaloes emerged, pulling a cart whose form must have been that of the first cart made by man, an ancient vision. Beneath, in the chasm that opened within a white rock-ringed rim, two falcons soared in inverse vortices.

Islands, stretching in a line to the horizon, becoming more well-defined with the fading light, appeared to solidify and come nearer; the colors of the pinkish rocks, fringed with intense green, grew deeper and warmer; along their steep profiles sharp against the sky the tormented pines, the splashy tufts of syringa, the evanescent foliage of the tamarisks, gray and soft like olives, stood out clearly. They passed through the arch. A long straight road traversed the town as far as the arch of a gate in the far wall. Around them village life was preparing for its nocturnal repose; people lolled in their doorways, watching them. An old man who had followed them told how, in the time of the last good hearted count, at this hour curfew would ring and the gates would be shut, and the little village would remain closed and protected on its rock between sea and sky.

Outside the walls they again found the night, and

the immense expanse of the sea. In the east an enormous moon, deep red, rose in the sky. They watched in silence, absorbed in their own thoughts, from the fantastic peak of the promontory, between sea and moon, watched over by the mauve walls of the castle. It was not cold; in the perfectly calm air there was a tranquil security. They settled into the cushions of the automobile, wrapped up in blankets. They hated the thought of passing that enchanted night in the stuffiness of some ugly hotel.

Corinna slept quickly, naturally; she was tired. Following the thread of his own thoughts, Gherardo couldn't manage to close his eyes. After what seemed like an endless period of time, he rose carefully, covered Corinna as well as he could, tucking her in like a baby, and went walking back and forth on the rim of the cliff, in an ocean of moonlight, thinking. Since they had left Cerreta certain concerns about life, about the profound and apparently inexorable justice that must exist in nature, had left him shaken and doubtful.

While he had been trying to do his duty, to stick to his battle and fight for the good, everything had gone wrong for him. Then he had thrown responsibility from his shoulders, and no sooner had he shaken off the yoke of a duty not fully done than a contented peace had entered his life and, no matter how much he tried to resist it, conveyed him to a state of happiness. What was even worse, beneath all his superficial prevarications he felt he was in the right, the just way; to

finally live in unison with things, with the plants and animals, as nature and God wanted their creatures to live. As soon as he left the natural forces that worked against him at Cerreta in peace, it seemed that they came to him, to offer him their beauty. And he was no longer in a struggle with nature, but in its grace. The ways of the Lord were certainly very mysterious.

That decay, that poverty against which he had struggled so hard before giving up as beaten, had become a liberation, now that he had accepted it. Beyond the obstinate effort to impose order on men and things, it seemed that a more clement and more peaceful God was warning him: look, your needs are few, true enjoyment is easily obtained and costs nothing. The beauty of the universe, the less you disturb it the more it gives pleasure; love, the less you worry about it the more it will flourish in your heart; what else is worth living for? Pleasures are for all, even the poorest; the pains, the worries, more often than not man creates for himself. So wasn't it in letting oneself live without seeking to do better, in this accepting life as it was, without always thinking of tomorrow, if not for oneself then for those who will come after, that man found truth and divine justice?

And like nature, Corinna. It was enough that they had come away, that they had abandoned themselves to the natural desire for joy, for peace. Perhaps their love would flower anew, like a plant in the rain, that simple and healthy love nature dispenses with equal abundance to people like Bello, and perhaps more

generously to them, in a compensation that was unjust but they had yielded to, accepted. Corinna seemed to need nothing else, as if in that alone she found her true element. She let herself live, like the plants. Even his rancor against Cerreta, against his ungrateful and obstinate land, was fading. Not that he had forgotten it, but it was present only like a distant background in those paintings of Giorgione in which the figures occupy the foreground, but the eye lets itself go willingly to the depth of the landscape. So was it necessary to enter into nature; one could not use her with violence; one could, one must, change oneself, to belong to her. He felt that he had found the truth, and he promised himself that he would follow it, at Cerreta, when he returned.

A slight change in the shoreline of the gulf, a newly visible separation of the coast from the slightly softer edge of the sea, warned him of a change in the light. From behind, against a line of distant mountains, the sky showed a weak shade of pink. As it gradually became lighter Corinna opened her eyes naturally, like the corolla of a flower that opens to the light, and finding him beside her, smiled at him. Forms emerged rapidly, bit by bit. From the sea, islands emerged, diaphanous, bathed in gold. The water, unrippled by a single breath of air, appeared to separate with reluctance from the air, as if they were of the same substance. Then the sun rose from behind, reddening the rocks and extending its light across the water. The mountains that overlooked the dawn were already en-

veloped in a pale blue mist, like a veil that one removes at the first thin light of day only to restore with indulgent pleasure at dusk. And the rounded tops of the islands appeared more tenuous, more diaphanous in the air, with forms that sought to vanish between sea and sky.

When the road turned inland it was evening. The countryside became desolate, with small empty plateaus broken by the dark beds of dry streams. Suddenly on a small bare hill rose a tower, pointed to the sky. The headlights caught lazy carts whose drivers moved slowly aside with angry voices. The voices, hot in the shade, with rich soft accents, awoke in Corinna currents of drowsy life. In the speed of the reflectors that bordered the road, bathing it with quick flashes, she saw her youth and felt herself reenergized by the wind that swept her forehead.

Then on the horizon a great light suddenly became visible; it was Rome.

XXXI

Most Illustrious Signor Padrone.

MI write to tell you to enjoy your vacation because up here, God willing, everything is going well. That cow at Montecchio that was going lame is cured of its infection and is out of danger.

Biancardi has started cutting the woods at Ceppa. He figures that he should get seven hundred quintals of charcoal from there. Pasquale thinks eight hundred, but he's always optimistic. We should also thin out the ilex at Castiglioni, where the plants are too thick and are beginning to be stunted. We should cut every third or fourth for their health. But we'll do whatever you say.

The permit has arrived to thin the chestnut grove, and we have already started, over at San Bernardino. Apparently there's a shortage of lumber, because as soon as I mentioned it Saturday at the market half the merchants of Siena surrounded me. If this keeps up we should make a pretty penny.

The wheat is up, and doing well. With this good weather we've been able to do a proper job of plowing and sowing. And then it rained at just the right time. If nothing goes wrong we should have a crop twice as big as last year's.

At Casanova, a family from Lombardy has asked to be assigned the farm. They're young folks who want to move from

up there because they say it's getting too crowded. I told them that I would write you and await your orders. The worst problem is what to do with Bello's wife and those kids, where to put them? And on that subject, the Carabinieri from Pian di Feccia came to get information about the fire at Poggio al Santo. About Bello and Teresa's husband we haven't heard anything. Some say that they're hanging out in the woods between Cerreta and Montorsaio. It would be a hard job to flush them out.

The cash account is sufficient for now. I've paid the semi-annual taxes. The worst is past. From now on, with the sale of timber and the thinning of the chestnuts, we should have nothing to worry about for a while.

So don't worry, enjoy yourselves, you deserve a bit of relaxation, if you don't mind my saying so. And you will see, Most Illustrious Signor Padrone, that things are going well up here. We're doing everything as if you were here. Your most humble servant, Ruggero Pannini.

Gherardo let his gaze run over the roofs along the Tiber, the gashes of the streets among the dark masses of tiles. Franca had found them this apartment, a little high, the four flights of stairs a bit fatiguing, but well worth the trouble. From their window, their backs turned on the bare crude granite eruptions of the new city, they commanded a view of old Rome, along the Tiber. It was the studio of a painter who had gone to spend the winter in Paris, "to find himself again," he said. He too. Rome, Paris; the sea, the mountains; solitude, companionship; the essential was to change,

to flee from the prisons of habit and of duty. Anything can meet the need, providing it is the opposite of how one has been living up to now.

The home of an artist, it had been furnished with a hurried good taste that didn't deny certain comforts. In the use of materials with great effect and little durability, in the mixture of the ultramodern with the classic, there was evidence of a sense of the transient that seemed to agree with their current way of feeling, in contrast with Cerreta, where even the smallest things conveyed a sense of the centuries-old and unchangeable.

Gherardo put the letter in his pocket; a sense of wealth, of power, invaded him. Even making the necessary allowances for Ruggero's optimism and desire to make a good impression, the news still remained good. It had only taken Gherardo's absence for things to work themselves out. The thought made him smile. What a strange thing, wealth. Certainly three-quarters illusion. What is there really, in possessions? He knew perfectly well that he was basically nothing more than an administrator of other people's money, even though at that moment he felt strong, rich, owner of an estate, and Rome, extended at his feet, felt like a conquered city. But then, with a single stroke of bad luck he could become poorer than the least of his peasants, who at least were almost assured of their bread.

To Corinna's surprise, and his own, he was getting used to city life, not merely with resignation but actually with zeal. It was he who searched out company,

pushed her to frequent old haunts. He didn't make a mystery of his poverty, rather he appeared to derive a proud satisfaction in showing it off. People seemed to admire that attitude; perhaps, hearing him vaunt it so much, they believed it less. Certainly he was experiencing a sense of independence, of liberation.

At Franca's house, among her most intimate circle of artists and literati, Gherardo had found some old acquaintances. Almost without realizing it, following his natural inclination, he found himself imperceptibly taking up his old life among paintings, critics, experts. With a mental agility that surprised him, he resurrected his old capabilities intact and ready for development, as a swimmer who hasn't seen the sea for years is amazed to feel the old vigor in his arms. Could it be that the intense life of Cerreta had only been a parenthesis? Such ideas made him smile, but he couldn't deny that he was thinking less and less of Cerreta.

It happened that an expert in artistic matters, an American who had been a good friend in his Florentine days, introduced him to a compatriot who had come to Rome to study art history, and at the same time to acquire a few paintings and develop a small collection. She was a young woman, cheerful, full of life; she soon began to spend much time in their company.

Corinna, though she was daily finding old friends, and was gradually and almost despite herself rebinding old ties that she had let drop, felt a sense of being on

the edge of society, of no longer belonging, though she also found it pleasant to feel that she was welcome to enter if she wished. The company of the young American also held the attraction of great freedom, without ties or motives other than the pleasure of getting together with friends she found pleasant. She knew how to amuse herself as, she said smiling, was recommended by her husband, in America. She had no malice, was healthy with the health of a young animal that cannot be corrupted even by contact with evil.

Despite her light-heartedness, the American was fully aware of the subtle conspiracies that wove through the world of paintings, some aimed at her own pocketbook. But she possessed the simple and direct shrewdness of her race, and her apparent naiveté had occasionally enabled her to get the better of sharper and more complicated minds. Also she was daughter and wife of businessmen, and she understood that she could consult Gherardo without restraint.

In helping her to put together a collection, in dealing with the paintings, in examining them, in trying to decipher their eternal mysteries, Gherardo found himself again with an enjoyment that he would not have believed possible. Not always did this come without a certain tug at his heartstrings to see pass through his hands some little treasure that he would have loved to get for himself. But this was a bitterness that only complicated, but did not diminish, his pleasure.

One day, all distraught, his new pupil came to tell

him that she believed she had discovered nothing less than a Tintoretto. It was an unfinished thing, little more than a sketch, but that was more than enough. She wanted Gherardo to see it that very day to help her make a decision; she was afraid that it would get away. That afternoon they had planned to visit Franca, who was entertaining, but there was no alternative: Corinna would go alone. "I'll make your excuses for you."

The phrase already sounded bitter as it came to her lips. There was a sense of separation, which sometimes rose between them. They nearly always went out together, although in public they hardly saw each other, always talked with others. And in the evening, when they found themselves alone, they were either too tired to exchange impressions or they understood each other so well that there was no need; their impressions were either so similar that they weren't worth discussing, or so different that it was better to keep quiet. Meanwhile she feared that Gherardo was changing, becoming another person, escaping her.

The Tintoretto was not a Tintoretto; it was however a beautiful picture by one of those sixteenth century Venetians who first knew how to appreciate the full joy of color. From the background of wide brown brush strokes, set off by ample green drapery, advanced the figure of a woman. The face, perhaps originally unfinished, was lost under the yellow of ancient varnish, but the barely visible contours were enough so that the whole seemed balanced and complete. From

the dark and concealing background, a leg brightly emerged below folds of material fastened by a clasp of precious stones that had the grace of a flower. It was flesh more alive, more desirable than real; there was all the pleasure of seeing, of touching the flesh. But Tintoretto it was not. It must be someone earlier, just after Giorgione; it would be necessary to search among his followers; it was an unexpected flare, a flash of genius from a minor artist. Or else, Gherardo reconsidered, it could be the work of none less than one of the greats; he sensed the hand of a master.

The dealer, a little man with a pale, fine Jewish profile, thin transparent hands darkened at the fingertips by the dust of the antiquities he kept in those moldering rooms, was not a lover of paintings; by preference he dealt in laces and majolica. This one had come his way by chance, had pleased him; he couldn't resist the desire to have it. He appreciated, as they did, the delightful light, the mystery that he felt it contained. Had he not found himself faced with a major obligation he would not have parted with it; but each has his way of understanding his duty, and this he could not avoid.

They tried to talk him down: it was a school painting, not by a maestro, the period wasn't appropriate. But he couldn't be dissuaded. He knew that they wanted it; he was concerned that he hadn't asked enough. He was on the verge of saying, "I've decided not to sell," when the young woman said, "Okay, I'll take it." And they put it in the car and took it away.

They went straight to Gherardo's house and stopped to examine it and discuss it calmly. They were excited and happy, but also a bit anxious.

Corinna was in her room, on the bed, dressed, with her face hidden between her hands.

"What's the matter? Don't you feel well?" Gherardo leaned over her to give her a kiss and a pat, but she pushed him away.

"But what's wrong?"

Corinna turned; her eyes were red and hard and her face tense, changed.

"What has happened to you?" he asked.

"What does it matter to you! Why do you ask? I could be living in another world, it would be the same to you. . . ."

"But what's happened?"

"Who's out there?"

"Sally has bought a painting. If you wish. . . ."

Suddenly Corinna got up:

"I'm coming. I'll wash my face and come out."

Standing before the painting, Corinna was conscious of nothing but the profound and vibrant understanding that flowed between Gherardo and the young foreigner. That intense love of the two of them for the same thing was worse than a blow; she might just as well have learned that they were having an affair. She was sorry to learn with certainty of such an innocent but so close, so intimate an understanding between those two. And she would have liked to convince herself that was the only motive for her spiteful attitude,

but it wasn't simply that.

At Franca's, among the usual intellectual crowd, she had found Ranieri, who in that company was a fish out of water. As soon as he saw her he attached himself to her as if she were a life buoy. And she felt in his presence a sense of respite, of freedom. A philosophical discussion was raging, as near as she could judge from the few words that succeeded in getting a foothold in her inattentive and disoriented mind above the fog of general discussion. In short order the field had been taken over by two who seemed to possess a vast treasury of unintelligible phrases and high-sounding names, throwing them out like aces and face cards in a card game, each striving to outdo the other. One was a pale young man whose pallor seemed to be accentuated with powder, with long hair and eyebrows jet black as if painted with a brush. He was tall and thin, dressed all in gloomy black and, with his fluid and transparent hands and pink manicured nails, was making grand harmonious gestures. The other was an older man of serious and intelligent mien; she was surprised to see him taking part in this battle of words, before that circle of assorted faces with the most varied expressions of concentration, from absolute emptiness to an absent vague dreamy amazement that every now and then showed a sign of understanding such abstruse matters. With a smile of mutual agreement, in a moment when the discussion showed signs of becoming general, she and Ranieri rose. In Franca's studio they found peace and tranquility. In the soft light, they

could let themselves go, with good humor reawakened by escape from that gathering of deep minds. What a great thing to be normal. In their day there had been none of that sort of thing.

They began talking of friends from the past. In the strange sense of isolation that had surrounded her in re-entering this world, she had been asking herself what had happened to disband her circle of friends and strew them to the winds, like hatchlings from the nest. Little by little, she had learned about this one and that, strange news, sometimes incredible, that made her feel she had known them under a mask that later life had removed, perhaps simply because in youth their character had not yet been formed. Ranieri was up-to-date, and the news he gave her was increasingly incredible. How many, in that brief space of time, had already become involved in some drama, or, more simply, some comedy. In some one could already sense that in their marriage a hidden tragedy was waiting to mature, or that perhaps had already occurred and could only be guessed at. It gave the impression of a cemetery lovingly watched over by the infinite indulgence of the good society. Perhaps even in her own case it was on this return to herself that she had welcomed the contact with this young man. Gradually, on the little couch, without making any gesture or movement, Ranieri Cennini had moved toward her until he was beside her, their two bodies touching along their entire length. Incredulous and shocked, Corinna rose, re-entered the salon; all the

closeness that she felt for him had disappeared; was it possible that he thought that she . . . but perhaps earlier, in those earlier days. . . .

“But it’s a Titian, Titian as a young man! It’s unmistakable. Titian in his first attempts, when he had just begun to move out on his own!” Gherardo’s enthusiastic shout, like a discordant note in a musical piece, remained suspended, shockingly out of place but incapable of being changed or cancelled.

XXXII

Under a gray sky that spoke of snow soon to come, the countryside folded and unfolded in great undulations; along the road the twisted cliffs opened as if to swallow them and then chase behind them. Beyond, the bleak and barren fields flew by in short and angry gusts of wind heavy with imminent rain. Under a bare tree a shepherd, wrapped in a blanket that covered him from head to toe, looked like one of those scarecrows that the winds seem to enjoy attacking. Even the sheep and cows that watched them pass, immobile and vacant, reflected the sadness of the season.

A long procession of aqueduct arches marched past against the background of gray sky. Arriving at the sad little village that dominated the excavations they felt a pang of disillusion. They couldn't recall what they had expected to find, but all they saw was the shoulder of a grassy hill, spotted with a few scrubby oaks and the rocky piles of detritus that marked the excavation. Here and there goats were grazing. Coming closer, they met a man who stopped to look at them with a certain insistence; he was the custodian of the dig. Gherardo easily aroused in him the interest of a fellow enthusiast, and he told them of his work. When they

were not digging, he organized, cleaned, and mended the pots, amphorae, and vases taken from the tombs or sometimes found by the farmers in plowing. The vases were all harmonious of form; their vast abundance, instead of monotony, gave the impression of riches, of fabulous grandeur. In the little museum the man showed them how the fragments were reassembled, how they were glued together, the simple tools of the potter. Leaving the room and finding themselves in front of a hill covered with dried up grass, they experienced a new set of impressions. With simple words he brought alive the buried city, or rather the various cities that, as he explained, reposed one above another in the ground under the last, that of the conquerors, the Romans. Fervently he recounted their history and pointed out its evidence; they felt themselves sharing the happiness of this man who loved his work.

“Now we’re out of money and are no longer digging, but we know all the cities, the tombs; I know the plan of the Etruscan city, the temples, the piazzas, the streets, as if they were here in the light of day. If I’m still alive, God willing, when we begin digging again people will see what the Etruscans could do.” He remained a moment in silence, then added, pointing out an excavation that seemed to be a step cut into the hill: “Do you see those broken pieces of column on that shelf? The Apollo was discovered there, the Apollo of Veio. We started by finding the columns, went forward very carefully. Under the hoe we heard

the ring of terracotta. Without touching it, we dug away the earth, leaving it undisturbed. With the last shovelful of earth the head was uncovered; the statue was lying there, as if it had fallen all in one piece from its pedestal, and had remained just there ever since."

They were astonished to see the place where, after so many centuries of silence, a forgotten civilization had risen again, like a human species that had disappeared from the face of the earth.

The custodian seemed to be imagining the hordes of Romans as they burst into the conquered city, toppling the fragile god with a crash. Or, in the devastated city, abandoned, dead, the statue rocking on its unstable pedestal to finally fall over one day in the desolation, in the thousand-year silence. One felt dominated, almost oppressed by the statue's majestic presence, as if, called from its niche in the museum, it might reappear on its desolate hill. It was impossible to conceive a place more appropriate for such a vision than that hill. Behind them, in contrast, was the miserable feudal village, and the rare passers-by, humble workers, shepherds, all with the coloring of malaria sufferers. Gherardo pictured the statue re-erected on the yellowed grass, near the reddish spoils of the excavation, where people could absorb the message of the buried age. In the statue's powerful act of bending it seemed that his shoulders carried the weight of all the past. His smile – but, is it really a smile, Leonardo? – looked beyond life, where man fears to look. Caught up in that solemn vision, Gherardo suddenly thought of

Teresa of Castiglioni, coming down the hill under the ilex; the Apollo had that same silent pride.

Under the gray sky they felt evening coming on, with a certain dismay. They left behind in that sad and abandoned place the hope that one day, removed from the mean shadows of the museum and carried as in ancient triumph through the broken columns of his temple, Apollo of Veio might rise again, and that the buried city, beneath him in the hill, might not be further disturbed by the men who had given him back his identity.

Unexpectedly, from the mouth of the narrow valley, came the rumble of an engine. As if clinging to the roughness of the land, the bestial form of a tractor came forward, attacking the soil, breaking the surface, digging with the blade of the plow. Behind, the slice of earth rose and then fell broken into pieces, as after a moment of life. At a stump or a large rock the machine dug in, the engine roared with effort, then moved forward calming again in a declining rhythm, leaving behind the brown slice of open earth.

They came away thoughtful, in silence. But, at a ditch, Gherardo stopped: "Look."

Corinna didn't see anything. Gherardo climbed down the bank, broke a branch from a hazelnut bush, and handed it to Corinna; already the new buds were beginning, and below on the dry trunk the new little leaves of early spring were just showing.

During their return, in the monotonous rhythm of the drive, Gherardo at times seemed to forget that he

was at the wheel of an automobile. As he sank deep into his thoughts, the car would move slower and slower, as if the motor were dozing off; then all of a sudden it would accelerate furiously.

Back at their apartment he found a letter from Ruggero. With the imminence of the annual accounting the effects of many of the changes at Cerreta were becoming evident. At Casanova the Lombards had arrived and appeared to be doing well; at least for now they were showing great dedication to their new challenges. At Castiglioni a shepherd could be moved back there, if a bit of work on the roof and the stairs were done so that his small family could be housed in the upstairs rooms, and below in that hole where Teresa used to live a sheepfold could be made. In the bottomland there was plenty of pasture; this year's lambing would produce a goodly flock without having to buy outside the estate. The wheat was coming along beautifully; if nothing went wrong there would be a full harvest this year.

Everything else was going fine. Ruggero probably knew how to keep to himself any news that might upset the padrone. However, last Saturday, near Le Cetine, there had been an attack on the superintendent of Marmoraia. Three ugly ruffians had jumped out of the brush and, in less time than it takes to tell it, one took the head of the horse and the other two were at each side, guns leveled. It was rumored that there had been an escape from the Mastio di Volterra prison, a condemned murderer nicknamed Blondie, who had since

been seen hanging around the Osteria Bianca. About Bello and Anselmo nothing was known, or no one was talking.

Corinna glanced at him, her eyes quizzical. When he raised his eyes, she smiled at him: "Well, when do we go?"

Gherardo responded, a little impatiently, "There's no reason to hurry." A moment later, carelessly, he added, "But you're right, we shouldn't wait too long."

XXXIII

That year at the annual accounting, Amedeo appeared for the first time as the new head of Sant'Ansano. After Anselmo's theft they had had to borrow grain, and had fallen into debt to the farm center. To balance the account they made use of their stable, and with the sale of the heifers and two litters of piglets, had come out even.

Without ceremony Ruggero asked about Virginia: "Why doesn't she marry that boy from Camporedalda?"

"Mamma doesn't want her to. But perhaps now she might let her. Maybe the padrone could talk to her."

"Two strong women like Norma and Teresa should be able to work it out," said Gherardo, who always admired those women, who were the bedrock of their families. "If Rocco joined the family you could really do some serious farming. With two men everyone would be better off. I'd consider building an extra bedroom for the couple."

"But we have very little land."

"I had in mind giving you the Pianacce zone, toward Montarrenti, all those pastures. It's short of water at present, but it only needs a few ditches; we could assign the work to you and pay you for it."

"It's rough land, poor."

"You could improve it; it's been fallow for twenty years. But with the drainage ditches restored and a couple of plowings done right, it would soon improve. You'd need more livestock, two pairs of oxen, at Sant'Ansano. It would be a good thing. We'll talk more about it. And you, Amedeo, no wife in sight?"

He had no sooner spoken than he could have eaten his words; he had made it a rule not to look into the private lives of the peasants. He feared he might, moved by mere curiosity, arouse dark resentments in these people who basically, as he had learned by experience, had a natural delicacy that in other circumstances would have quickly been worn away by the ways of the world. But before the closed silence of that timid being he just couldn't hold back. He felt a somewhat special concern for their family, perhaps nothing more than pride in what he had been able to do for them. And Amedeo was a man now, a leader who was heading the family.

"I? Who would want me? I have too much to do to start looking for love. We've got enough women in the house."

Gherardo had in mind a girl who he had met in the fields of Le Palazze, the eldest daughter of the Francis, the peasants who had come to the new farm that had been created by dividing the land. They were people of the plains, from near Chiusi. He had been looking at one of the poor patches of woods that still dotted Cerreta's cultivated fields. Every time he saw them he was

taken by impatience to clear them, blaming himself for not yet having done so. The girl was tying up bundles of cuttings from the pruning; in bending to tie the branches she showed hard, strong legs, planted like columns; in getting up with the load on her shoulders, her back gave an elastic ripple from her deep flanks, like the muscles of a strong horse pulling a cart up a slope. What a difference between her glowing health and the skinny, used up quality of the race from up here. However, his choice had been made; by now he loved the fine, bony suffering profiles, their quiet manner and humble dignity. The people of the plain were healthy and strong, but also more rude, vulgar.

Finally, this year, at the accounting some progress was noticeable. With strict guidance, thanks to the patience of Pasquale, even those poor wretches of the Poggio — Papero and those four womanless men, so dark and hairy they looked like wild boars — seemed that they would come out a bit ahead. They knew nothing, but they obeyed. Two had been put to work as laborers at the Fattoria to defray a part of their debt; the others stayed on the farm. Day after day Pasquale went up there to give them their orders: to-day you hoe the grapes, when it rains and the ground becomes muddy you trim the hedges, check the walls and the drainage ditches, tomorrow, if the weather is good, you go back to making the furrows for the spring planting, and so forth. Not that they learned — he would always have to follow up if he expected results — but they were obedient and the farm seemed

to be taking on a new look. To tell the truth, Pasquale did it gladly, partly because he suspected that sooner or later Anselmo and Bello would turn up at that isolated farm in the woods; he hoped to cross their tracks.

The one who had really improved his position was the previously ill-starred Boccini, the farmer of Sant'Ansano, Teresa's neighbor. On finding himself with a credit at the farm center he had taken on a manner that was proud and arrogant but most of all comical in a man so fundamentally small and humble. It wasn't the amount — his credit didn't amount to a hundred lira — but it was enough to give wings to his imagination. What he might do the next year one couldn't imagine, now that the stables were in order, the litters of pigs were healthy, and the cleared woods were providing pasture. The new lambs were a pleasure to see as they doubled in size, strong and lively. The sheep had milk; they would be able to make three times as much cheese. The witch doctors and the spells were forgotten; according to him his luck had been bad because of certain conspiracies, certain mysterious hatreds and vendettas, which had been confounded by his cleverness and tenacity. His illusion of strength was both ridiculous and moving.

Also the Gepponis of Camporedalda. These by now had a substantial credit with the Fattoria and were doing well as a classic Tuscan family. Gherardo had talked to Gepponi about Rocco and Virginia:

"We'll have to do for those youngsters."

"Rocco is a vagabond," the old peasant had responded, "but since he's brought that little creature into the world he's another person. He's become sensible."

These talks were a great balm for Gherardo's worries; not even he, with his self-confident hopes, could ever have expected that people would speak to him with such openness, with such open and profound sincerity.

"Tell that to your wife. If she would get together with Teresa, they could work it out. Between two women like them everything is possible," said Gherardo with a youthful fervor that surprised him. He considered it a weakness at his age, but by now he realized that he would never lose it.

"Ah, yes," answered the peasant seriously, "they're two good women. And that one down there, bringing up two children at Castiglioni, with that old woman on her hands. . . . Really, we were always suspicious of that Anselmo."

"Ah, him," interrupted Ruggero. "No one has seen him again; he's taken off, but everything is being done to lay hands on him; it's jail for him."

Yes, there was an improvement in general, but for the peasants, not for Gherardo. But that's where things had to start. The ones who complained were the newcomers: the Senesis of Le Palazze, the Capannis at Cerreta, the Valoris, who from being woodcutters had gone to work as sharecroppers at Padule, and after the flight of Bello at Casanova, the Bellenghis,

the so-called Lombards, who had come from Brescia and taken on Bello's farm. Whatever had happened to Bello's wife with that nest of rickety kids? Wherever had they ended up? On that question Ruggero could only give a vague answer: "They've gone to some relatives, over in Luriano. . . ." Perhaps so, or perhaps in some remote cave lost in some overgrown ravine the story of Teresa of Castiglioni was starting again. But Teresa was different; this woman wouldn't have the strength. He seemed to see them starving in the woods, like the boars when they can no longer find forage.

The discontent of the new peasants concerned him. It was essential that they come to love the land, begin to consider it as their own, and not think about leaving. But the first years are hard. To reach the proper balance between tillage and pasture, between wheat and forage for animals, between houses and stables, takes time; the farm is a delicate mechanism, and before it becomes balanced it goes through ups and downs. It can happen that the tenant farmer finds himself financially shaky, uncertain. If he doesn't have the tenacity to stick it out, and if he's not encouraged by the Fattoria, he finds himself in a purgatory of changing farms, year by year worse off, gaining nothing by the changes. The man ends by having only one worry, to produce enough to eat. Since there was a shortage of families everywhere, he could always find a roof and a little land. But it was a hard life, and it's thus that the farmsteads go to ruin. "This is the prob-

lem with our area," said Ruggero. "We can't give orders. If a farmer doesn't do his part and we fine him, he doesn't argue, he just abandons the farm and that's that. And we can't afford to leave a farmstead empty. So how can we make him obey?"

"Don't worry about it, Ruggero," answered Gherardo. "Just let's be sure we do our part. First of all, divide the land properly, in fair portions, so that every farmer can grow enough for his family. Rather, a bit more. Bread is the first thing, then enough wine and oil for their needs. They shouldn't have to buy anything but clothing and shoes. And the cash they need should come from profit from the stables. They need something to smoke, that little vice of the men, and some ribbons for the women. If they keep their houses in order, if they don't lack animals and tools, if they're helped out when they're in need, you'll see that the desire to leave will diminish. There will always be vagabonds and they'll always want to move along, but the good ones will stay, will learn to love the land, their farms, you'll see. But it certainly will need time, a lot of time."

He himself, hadn't he run away? To search, to try to find something better . . . or maybe they too were just driven by a crazy desire to flee. But mostly they would come back, as he had come back, and those that had it in their blood would continue to roam.

In reducing the life of the peasant to its most basic expression, it seemed to be dangerously reduced to a more primitive, more natural, more just simplicity, a

system in which there were no padroni or underlings, and where everyone had the right to all the fruits of his labor. He could imagine himself, in that fantasy, on the same level as the others: it certainly wasn't the manual labor that bothered him, rather, every time that he passed a farmer or a woodcutter at work he experienced the desire, the longing to work with his hands, as if it were a natural right of which he had been deprived. But it was specific problems that brought him back down to earth: how to provide for the protection of the weakest, for the restraint of the avaricious and the sly? One head, one order, one government was needed, and it could be that, despite the defects of the present system, any other system would be worse. And how to protect the land from the avidity of those who would naturally like to profit from the work that had been done by previous generations? And how to provide for those who would come in the future. With some other form of ownership? And then who would love the earth? Without love the earth withers, becomes stingy to even its most dedicated sons.

Gherardo felt reabsorbed by Cerreta with an intense delight. It didn't surprise him any longer that people showed no special pleasure at his return. Among other things, the rumor had spread that he would have to sell the estate. But then, peasants are used to these things: padroni come and go, when one king dies they make another one, but the land remains, and the peasants are needed to work it. And it's

fair that it should be that way, Gherardo recognized, though not succeeding in escaping from a feeling of melancholy disillusionment. He had expected a certain resentment from his land at his absence; instead the spring was thrusting forth arrogantly in a violence of life, of bursting bark, skins, crusts, with a sovereign indifference to human affairs, even of those who loved it. And as long as nothing happened to make him angry, beyond the usual aggravations, laziness and carelessness, he didn't really feel physically back in control. Every so often he recalled the bitterness that he had suffered trying to hold on to Cerreta, and how close he had come to losing it. He felt like one convalescing from a long illness that could have been mortal; Cerreta must have suffered with him. The thought that others shared the possession with him, that he had to take them into consideration, that after having made the payments that weighed on the property there would be only enough left to him for a meager livelihood, didn't bother him. There was order in life; he derived a sense of peace from it, of justice, of moderation.

XXXIV

They needed to decide on a good time to visit Count Geminiani, but whenever they were at the point of doing so Corinna always found some excuse. Either she wasn't feeling well or she had too much to do around the house; these days she was always busy. It seemed to Gherardo that at times Corinna didn't look well, couldn't concentrate, couldn't deal with serious matters. But then she would switch into such a good mood, so tranquil, so serene, that he felt he must have been mistaken.

With a passion that made him smile, she, who at first never even noticed the things among which she lived, was taken with a need to beautify the house. She was relegating to the attic those florid furnishings that had filled their rooms in a ridiculous style. In the rooms of the Fattoria she had found many old, good pieces of furniture, no doubt those that had been removed to make way for the new styles. The carpenter was fully occupied in putting them back into mint condition. Gherardo was sometimes a bit perturbed; there was a lot of work to be done in rebuilding the fittings of a stable, the door of a pigsty, but the signora had ordered this, had need of that, right now . . .

Without saying anything, Gherardo sent for the few beautiful things that still remained from his old days. In the little, newly whitewashed church the chromolithograph of Saint Catherine over the altar had to give way to his Giovanni di Paolo. They held a solemn dedication ceremony with the new priest. For some reason Corinna, who had never given any signs of being deeply devoted, had insisted so strongly on re-establishing Mass at Cerreta that Gherardo had had to give in. The new priest was very young, almost a boy; he had a sickly air, ingenuous, a bit bewildered. At this opportunity to see the new priest, the redecorated church, and the padrone's painting, of which they had heard so many great things, the people had crowded in. The young man said the Mass with lightly emphatic gestures, pronouncing the Latin in a strong voice that broke into a falsetto whenever he emphasized a word. It was a long Mass, twice as long as the previous priest's.

An amazing thing happened near the end, after the raising of the host. The priest had turned toward his congregation, remained for a few moments immobile. The people stood in expectant attention. With his head bent to his chest and his hands together, in an uncertain low voice, he began to speak: "My dear people, we who are together in this humble little church that is being reopened to this congregation must today feel the presence of God, feel near to His heart that certainly in this hour is filled with divine love for us. If for even one soul saved the heavens are lit with re-

joicing, think what joy there must be among the blessed souls now, to see at this altar, so long deserted, the raising of the host blessed by the sacrifice and the bowing of the people before the miracle of bread and wine." His voice relaxed from its anxious tension, became gradually assertive. From looking down he raised his gaze on high, then fixed it on the faces intent on him: "I invite you, brothers, to unite with me in prayer that God will permit that up here, in this lost corner of the world, no more Sundays will pass without the people gathering around their pastor, whether with unworthy me or with others more worthy who will follow me, to thank the Lord for having protected them, for having given them their daily bread, and to meet after the labors of the week, in the love that He wants between Him and His creatures, and for His creatures among each other." The words of the young priest had seemed so natural that from the inspired ardor that animated him a wave of amazement had passed over them; among the women some faces were rapt as if in ecstasy. Gherardo felt slyly content, as if he had arranged a marriage that promised to be a success.

It can't be said that the Giovanni di Paolo greatly pleased the people. It was too humble, too rustic, too much like them, for them to consider it beautiful; its delicate lines were like their own. Though they looked at it without understanding, Gherardo cherished the illusion that they instinctively felt its precious and genuine beauty. Already he was toying with the idea of

cultivating the legend, based on the coat-of-arms that fortunately was not very legible on the frame, that the painting had been painted for Cerreta, or if it was not possible to discern there the flames of the Ardengheschi, maybe for Sant'Ansano or Castiglioni. And that perhaps it was a fragment of the painting sold by Count Ulderigo which after its many journeys had found itself again on the altar from which it had departed on its venal peregrinations.

The little ceremony had made a profound impression on Corinna. When Gherardo wanted to talk to her she tried to change the subject. She had felt herself almost physically elevated, with the other women who were kneeling around her, by that poor exalted priest. She didn't try to analyze; above all she didn't want to discuss it, or even to think about it.

In those days a great familiarity had developed between her and the women of Cerreta. They often came to her now for remedies for the usual childhood illnesses, which she got from the medicine chest she proudly kept stocked, and she was glad of the opportunity to chat with them. Anna had become an affectionate companion, more than a servant, and she was beginning to let herself go a little further, overcoming her usual reserve. For some reason, when Corinna was with her she felt herself becoming a child again. Her youthful years were passing, but this no longer disturbed her. She seemed finally to understand that far from being the most beautiful period of life, early youth is the age of most acute suffering, of morbid

sensibilities, of all the awkwardness of the yet unformed character, an age without balance and without peace, that suffers so much and makes others, especially loved ones, suffer as well. That summer she felt herself enjoying her new growth, as the butterfly must enjoy leaving behind the empty chrysalis to take flight. She became so simple in spirit, so at peace, that Gherardo sometimes no longer understood her, lost his way as if facing a new complication. Returning from his rounds he brought his most inspired thoughts and observations, choosing those that appeared to him the most beautiful, like a bouquet of flowers; she welcomed them with a smile that hinted of a subtle irony. She seemed to be smiling at his cleverness, as one compliments a boy who has written a good composition. But it was clear that these were not the important things to her, that she felt herself on a pedestal if not higher, at least more solid. At times Gherardo realized that she didn't understand very well what he was telling her, but she never asked for explanations.

One day, entering the living room, he found her up on a ladder supported by Anna, taking down from the wall the famous prints of oriental subjects. The harem girls were falling into disgrace. Corinna turned as he entered and, in a spell of dizziness, paled and slipped down the ladder into Anna's arms. She recovered quickly, but at Gherardo's frightened look she understood that she wouldn't be able to keep her secret much longer: she was pregnant.

It was she who finally decided to go to Montorsaio

the next day. Her pretext was a gift that Count Geminiani had sent, a pair of pigeons extraordinary for their size and, according to the message he sent, for their fecundity; also a rooster of foreign breed with a great imposing crest and flaming red wattles who, no sooner freed in the chicken house, shook his ruffled feathers and rising on his clawed feet looked around at the surrounding fowl like a true master, looking for a rival to combat and dethrone. Corinna was taking a new interest in the chicken house, with a strange personal affection, one might say, for the hens. She called them by name — Ciuffettina, Scodata, Superbiosa etc. — petted them, pampered them, then when the time came calmly gave Anna the orders to wring their necks. Count Geminiani seemed to have sensed, even if he hadn't witnessed, this metamorphosis. His gifts — every now and then the guards from Montorsaio came, and never empty-handed — had taken on a form more practical than previously; perhaps he had heard that Corinna was spending her time in the garden. Among other things he had sent a collection of seed packets: there were unusual species of melon, enormous pumpkins, and cabbages with ornamental leaves, bizarre but useful plants.

But the count was not at the villa. They had to descend to a place where he was correcting the course of a stream that had flooded that year, carrying off half a field and leaving behind, in the middle of the cropland, a huge bed of gravel and sand. He was busy taking measurements and level readings, while about twenty

workers covered a bank with sod. He greeted them with his usual warmth, perhaps a bit accentuated. He was grayer, seemed taller and thinner. He began to explain the work that was being done; they needed to build a small bridge to cross what was now a deep spot where carts used to be able to ford the stream in the dry season, to widen the bed at the curve where it was constricted, and close it between strong banks. Farther downstream they needed to straighten the watercourse and clear the mud, left by the flood, that had deflected the water back so that it broke through above. To Gherardo it seemed impossible that they had waited so long to do a job so obviously necessary.

"You see," said the count, "I've become worse than you; I do nothing but plan new projects. I'll end up by ruining myself."

The workers picked up their jackets and shouldered their tools. One by one they said good evening and dispersed in groups, some toward their homes on the plain, others up along the road to Montorsaio.

They too started climbing, in silence, sensing a serene communion of spirit developing. The road snaked along the grassy slopes in the increasing darkness. The days were getting longer, approaching summer.

As they reached the point of the hill where the view extended over the Feccia plain, where the purple mist of evening was rising, the count began to talk.

"You too were worried, Gherardo? You tried to escape? But then you came back. Finding myself alone again, I've been doing a lot of thinking. Paolo, my

bishop brother, spent some time up here with me. Feeling myself surrounded by that religious serenity, that abstract spirit of good, I wanted to make some grand resolution." The count smiled to himself. "Comparing myself to his piety I was ashamed, naturally. But then there is a big difference between him and me. He sees nothing but himself, seeks only to purify himself, elevate himself, in the contemplation of God. I, however, feel that my duty is properly here, on this land where God has put me, with these men who surround me. So we ended up by not agreeing."

"But meanwhile I began thinking. . . I no longer have anyone, you might say, no heirs. The old race is sterile. Certain ideas fascinate me. What to do with so much stuff, for whom? Why should these wretches who serve me have such difficulty in earning their bread, while I have everything? Now, on mature consideration, it seems to me impracticable, but I was full of enthusiasm; I developed so many schemes. Among other things I thought of selling the farms to the peasants, for very little, practically a gift. Or rent to them for a laughable price." Even he, thought Gherardo. "But I wasn't satisfied. And in practice . . . at first I thought I'd keep just a little for myself; I would never want to be as naked as Saint Francis. The villa, a little garden, a bit of farm, the wood lot . . . but then I realized that the others have needs that are met by the Fattoria, that it is essential to support the farms, to sell the products, to provide tools, machines. And pay the taxes, and organize the finances. What would they

be able to do alone, the peasants, each one for himself? A cooperative? I've seen many; I know how they end up."

"And thus I went from plan to plan. And I found so many things to consider. To get rid of one's things, of every possession, means to get rid of every responsibility. Renounce everything and hit the road to go begging from those who are better off, that is to become a vagabond. Basically it's a way to escape all the bother and live at others' expense. Lie down in the dust of a road and wait for someone to throw you a crust of bread."

"And then? And then we are necessary, even us. Tell me what would happen to certain poor wretches like those that you also have at Cerreta, like that Papero bunch at Poggio, if we weren't here to furnish them everything, to handle their affairs for them, to advance them bread when they have none, to keep them from being cheated by those vultures who prey on poor people and bleed them dry? It's true that among us there are those who profit from them, those who live in the city and spend their time squeezing out profits. But there will always be parasites in any system. And these are no longer the times"

It had become dark. Above, on the mountain, the lights of Montorsaio shone. Behind them the vast plain was veiled in a violet mist. Beyond, below the circle of dark mountains, the little villages perched on the hills were beginning to be crowned with lights. The sky above them was pale and clear.

"A wonderful thing, to be busy. Sometimes it's a salvation. I've thought a lot about you, Gherardo, I understand very well how you were tormented earlier, when you came up here: that need to do something, to better things, to improve the lot of the land and the people. We old-timers, we're asleep, we forget; everything becomes a habit. Then thinking always about profit, as if it were a duty. You must come from a race of farmers, I don't mean right now, perhaps, but from before. . . ."

"Well, yes," Gherardo answered with a certain sense of pride, thinking again of the ancient cottage among the farms of Val di Bisenzio. "True."

"It shows," said the count. "Then, we don't take it to the grave, the land. The fruits, if we treat her well, she'll give them, but then she wants them back. You know that. And whoever doesn't deserve it, who doesn't do his part and doesn't take care of her, finds himself with a handful of dust. One who does nothing, who doesn't know how to do anything, who thinks only of himself, the land will sooner or later get rid of him. I don't say that it's a perfect system but, to change it, we'd all have to be saints, and in that case any system would do well. Men are what they are; if we did things differently there would be more injustice than now." After a short silence he added, with emphasis, as if to underline a definite conclusion: "I know there's one place in the world where I can do good, and that's the one I occupy."

All true, thought Gherardo; the truth is to love the

earth. With that everything is justified.

They couldn't talk about Sandro, though. Perhaps in time, some other time. But while they talked of everything else, Sandro was always present for each of them. If Count Geminiani had let himself open up in this way, it was exactly for that reason, as if underneath his conversation they could hear his thoughts. And every so often he would look at Corinna, as if there were an understanding between them.

They had to stay at Montorsaio for dinner, the count insisted. They returned to Cerreta late at night. When they reached the fork at Braccio the headlights outlined and brightly lit, between the oaks that lined the edge of the road, four human shapes. While they were uncertain whether to stop or to accelerate, the Brigadier of Pian di Feccia stepped out of the woods.

"Ah, it's the padrone of Cerreta. Good evening to you. Are you carrying a weapon with you?"

"I? I don't even have a license. . . ."

"Bad. Then I would have to fine you if you had a gun," he said laughing. "But seriously, listen to me, don't travel the roads at night without some defense. It's not prudent."

"Is something up?"

"No, but there are some no-goods in the area, three of them. The day before yesterday it was Papero's turn, at Poggio. They tied them hand and foot, the scum, but they didn't find anything. What could they have found? They beat them up; then fried up half the chicken coop, ate and drank, and took off leaving

them there, those idiots, all tied up; if the guard Pasquale hadn't happened to pass by they could be there still. Would you like one of us to accompany you to Cerreta?"

"No thanks; what do you think could happen to us, in the car? We'll go full speed."

"Then good night, and until next time."

"Good night."

The night seemed to have changed; those shadows among the trees, those words in the dark, had brought home to them facts and people who at first had seemed unconnected to their life. The oaks flew by as if animated by a fast and ephemeral life. In the woods, three bandits, as in the days of the brigands. What a shame. Perhaps they hid in the woods because they weren't suited to civilization, until their hunger made them come out, overcame their fear; and then finally they were hunted down, surrounded as in a boar hunt, and caught. They elicited more pity than fear.

XXXV

A long afternoon in June, hot, with the smell of hay drying in the fields. They went as far as Castiglioni, home of the new shepherd. On passing through the woods they were impressed by the intensity of the odors, each stronger than the next, that permeated those mild hours when the sun already was moving toward a long drawn out sunset.

At Casanova they stopped off at the Lombards. Despite their warm welcome they noted a profound disquiet, as of lost creatures looking for guidance. The head of the family was a youth of around thirty. It was the usual story: when he had married and his wife's parents had come to live with them, the little farm he shared with his brothers couldn't support them all. Hiring out as laborers wasn't feasible; there were no jobs available. They had heard that in Tuscany, toward the Maremma, they were looking for farm families, and so they decided to move on. It was painful, leaving the land where they had been born, but what else could they do? Strange, they seemed more rustic than the woodcutters of Cerreta who had never left their woods. Where did the people from up here get their instinctive fineness of gesture, of language, of their na-

ture? Gherardo looked around at the wooded slopes of Boscogrosso and Montemaggiori, places of unimaginable wildness. The Lombards came from a more civilized area. Was it the wildness that protected the strength of the local stock? The Lombards looked around at this closed valley in which they found themselves confined as if asking if it was really here that they were destined to live, if they had not better shoulder their tools and go on their way. They were strangers, alone.

Together they inspected the farm. Gherardo found them so agreeable compared to the locals. It was only when he left them that he realized the reason, and it didn't make him happy; the others, more or less, felt themselves in possession of the land; these still did not. When he pointed out work that needed doing the newcomers always agreed, with a sort of absent minded humility. The others always opposed him, one way or another, if only for the sake of appearances.

Leaving the farm and climbing to a point overlooking the valley, Gherardo viewed the lands below with satisfaction. His old dream, getting the bottomlands of the Ricause valley under cultivation, could now be considered practically achieved. Here and there a bit of uncultivated land, a few thickets, still marked the sloping hillsides that unrolled from Le Vene as far as Castiglioni. But the job was essentially complete. That fall sixty or seventy hectares of land rescued from the junipers and scrub oak would be plowed and seeded. This was of capital importance for

the redemption of Cerreta; there they would be able to harvest a thousand or more quintals of wheat. So far the work had been done directly by Cerreta's employees. Open land, without the groves and vineyards that needed so much manual labor, could be managed profitably this way. But in time it would be necessary to break it up into farmsteads. Then houses would be needed, four or five at least. Gherardo's heart swelled as he eyed the slopes rising gently from the bottom-land, seeking the most appropriate sites. But when would he have the resources to do it? Ah, who knows, maybe never, and the old impatience to accomplish, to push ahead, overcame him.

Meanwhile it was urgent to provide a road to get there from the Fattoria, and at least initially he needed to fertilize the land well. Gherardo had in mind building a cobbled road that, taking off from the one that went as far as the Filicaie, would descend to the bottom of the valley, follow the Ricaua as far as Castiglioni, and then climb the other slope to meet the road to Camporedalda, thus it would be possible to make a circuit of the estate with carts, with agricultural machinery, and even by automobile. It would facilitate the hauling of the cut wood out of the forest and give greater value to the forest products. All of the estate would be brought closer to the outside world. He was able to point out to Corinna most of the route and to explain the difficulties. Before starting work it would be necessary to plan the most logical route, the most natural and efficient, taking into account the

slopes and a hundred other considerations so as not to learn too late and perhaps have to go back and do the work twice. Talking about it, it seemed simple enough, but in the reality it was not easy to decide how to go. The best route is often the one marked by the paths used by the peasants, but when there are three or four paths? Then, a route for a road for machines is not the same as one for walking, or for mules. And in some areas there were no paths at all.

When it came to practical questions on concrete matters, Corinna, who lent only a distracted ear to his more or less philosophical digressions and his bursts of inspiration, was now ready to criticize and above all to weigh the economic convenience, the costs and benefits. It amazed Gherardo how she had familiarized herself, without his realization, with the particulars of his work. So now he had to deal also with her. And her observations were useful, even if occasionally the discussions tended to become heated. Beneath it all, what a great hidden satisfaction he felt that they were working together.

A definitive decision on the road was never made. Little by little as they had the need they would do a piece, figuring it out as they went along, feeling their way; it was more or less the way the paths of the woodcutters develop in the woods.

They arrived at Castiglioni; the shepherd was moving his sheep out into the courtyard. There were many lambs this year, a real flock in the making; there was a feeling of growing abundancy. At the sound of

their arrival the shepherd turned and greeted them in his usual slow and solemn manner.

"Welcome, padrone, to Castiglioni. And you too, signora padrona mia."

Those words, and the tone in which the young man said them, were enough to transport them into another world, another time, unchangeable, eternal. The youth had uncovered his head, as curly and wooly as the back of his sheep. His look was distant, as if he were fixed on something far away. He was leaning in the archway and with a curved stick was prodding the sheep into the courtyard one by one, as if counting them.

"How do you find Castiglioni, shepherd?"

"Fine, padrone. Castiglioni is a prince's castle, in this great forest."

His words didn't appear strange. His demeanor, that faraway look, the slow and measured voice, had prepared them for his formal solemnity.

"Then you're happy here? You don't feel lost, down here in the depths of the forest?"

"To be alone is to gain paradise; one doesn't sin. And woods are more beautiful than towns."

He spoke extremely slowly, articulating the syllables like a speaker who wanted to convey the maximum of hidden meaning, but it was only his way of expressing himself; he had no other. As a result his words sounded aphoristic, heavy with significance. He gave full value to every single consonant. Gradually, as he spoke, one heard that in spending so much time alone

with his flock, in deep solitude, he had developed a mode of very slow and imaginative thinking, on grand but concise lines. Following his thoughts then, the words came forth with painstaking slowness.

The sheep began to bleat as they entered the courtyard; from a closed stable came the soft, yearning crying of the lambs. The shepherd opened the gate and the lambs came out in disordered jumps, maybe a hundred, all trembling with impatience on their unsteady legs, searching here and there in the flock for their mothers, trying this one and that one, and finally, trembling with excitement, folding their exaggeratedly long legs, pushing their heads under, bumping their heads against the swollen udders, and starting blissfully to suck.

“Look, padrone, to put together a good flock, when we’ve finished milking, and with these sorry sheep you milk little and finish soon, we’ll have to get rid of the old ones that would die on our hands. There are some that are sick; I’m beginning to know them one by one; they too will have to be sacrificed. This breed is impoverished and the bloodline has never been renewed, but it’s best to do it ourselves, gradually. We’ll keep this spring’s best lambs, then in October, when the flocks pass through from the mountains down to the Maremma, where I have friends among the shepherds, we’ll acquire some beautiful rams, of pure Roman breed. Within two or three years we will have renewed the entire flock.”

In the meantime the wife came out with two little



tots clinging to her skirt. It seemed impossible that they were hers; she seemed a child herself. How could she have brought them up, and fed them? Her face was so serious, like that of a small child when he thinks deeply. Gherardo was taken with a strange desire to touch her; she had that naïve quality of a creature brought up like a wild animal, close to nature. She watched her man talk, her man who fed her and her creatures. Gherardo felt the rebirth of the sympathy that life awoke in him, birth, the instinct of a living being to defend itself, to warm itself.

Leaving the children aside, the shepherd's wife waded into the sheep. Among the lambs there were still some who hadn't found their mothers and were wandering around lost and anxious among the flock. There were others going hungry, who had lost their teat; she reattached them, giving them a squirt of milk in the mouth to get them started. Other needy ones had emptied the udders of their mothers; she put them with any other ewe that didn't have a lamb.

"And then, padrone, if we're here, she and I, you'll see how much wool, how much more weight in the lambs, and how much longer the milking will last." The voice of the shepherd, in thinking of his success, became firmer and warmer. Between the walls of the ruined old castle in the forest, in the growing darkness, one had the sense of participation in an ancient fable or of hearing the words of a great book, of those simple tales that people hand down through the generations.

"The sheep like it up here. In summer, the worst season because they suffer from the dryness, there are perennial streams and the scrub is cool, and in the bottoms there's grass along the streams. In winter when the grass is thin we have the green brush in the woods, the ilex. In September we have the leaves of the poplars. And the manna ash is good too. Sheep need space; they don't like pastures where other animals have been. Up here there's lots of room," and with a vast gesture he embraced the valley and the wooded slopes that were becoming violet in color. "It's clean; the sheep enjoy wandering in the woods; they like the variety of food, and it's good for them. And thus they thrive. If you keep me here, you and I will do well, padrone."

Listening to his singsong speech, Gherardo let his view wander through the arch, across the valley. How beautiful was the unrolling of the meadows and the worked land; it seemed that this beauty had never before been revealed to him so completely, so thoroughly his. It was as if this should be enough, that he should not ask more of nature. The power to love it, or to make it suffer, was becoming his. There was a sense in which it was human, like a great extended body, in the slopes that the light of evening brought together in broad outlines, as far as the springs of Le Vene where two gentle hills closed the valley one overlapping the other. He felt overcome by a great feeling of a religious communion with the earth. Here, without any further question or doubt, was God; the divinity of

things — of the earth and of the heavens, of beings and of nature — was alive and present.

Above, from the dark of the ilex, appeared a man on horseback; it was Pasquale. He dismounted and saluted. Then he said, "Have you seen, padrone, if we've been able to find the person who would willingly stay at Castiglioni? He's really made for it. Have you heard him sing his poetry? Shepherd, give the padroni a couple of verses."

"Really, we'd enjoy it," added Gherardo.

"And by the way," Pasquale said, "you haven't seen anyone else?"

"The men from Brenna who are cutting in the Ceppa passed by; they were heading home: tomorrow's a holiday. Otherwise we've seen no one in these parts."

"Tell the padrone of the beauty of Castiglioni. You know the one . . . what's its title?"

"The Passion of Modern Life," the shepherd said with simplicity, and without further urging, began. It was a curious long poem in rhyme. Through an infinitude of images and symbols at each of which he interrupted himself to explain it or to recount some vicissitude in his life that the verse referred to, they barely succeeded in not losing the thread. After having been despised by men and even by his own family who considered him a fool or worse — and perhaps the poetry, and it wouldn't have been the first time, had something to do with it — at Castiglioni he had found his peace. He sang of the savage beauty of Castiglioni; one felt that he truly loved it.

From the obscure jumble of words, every so often a simple and grandiose concept would escape, a form solemn like the great trees or the hills. Unexpectedly the images assumed the naïve power of the figures in primitive frescoes.

The voice, first timid and uncertain, became steadily more sure. And the last lines were sounded proud and scornful in the dusk:

Now when I meet a man along the way
and there is no fraternal love between us,
my fierce and powerful curse
wounds him in life and is worse in death.
But I hope, brothers, to be blessed,
and then beautiful peace will open the door
to the ways of the world, both straight and crooked,
and then I will finish the poem.

XXXVI

The day that the new farmstead at Casaccia was completed, Gherardo wanted to celebrate the occasion with a bit of festivity in the fields. As in the old days, the neighbors came too: Count Geminiani, the Michelis, and a few others. Before the work at Casaccia had begun it had been only a ruin: four walls invaded by blackthorns and brambles; not even the oldest could remember that it had ever been inhabited. To the west of the new building, restored to its old status as a farmhouse, there rose an isolated ilex, enormous, round, perfect. Old Zani, with a glass of wine in his trembling hand, recounted: "In the time of Countess Adelaide, she too got it into her head to rebuild the Casaccia farm, but she died too soon, poor lady. My father, bless his soul, had been sent to cut the brush that had grown up in the fields, and I went along. I was thirteen or fourteen; now I am eighty-seven; do a little arithmetic, it was seventy years ago and then some. There was a thick growth of young plants, flourishing. I saw a young ilex, light of trunk and black of leaves, full of health. 'I want to save you,' I said. I cleaned it up carefully, carefully; there it is. We are the same age, me and him." Beside the trunk

of the great tree, the dark and wrinkled old man seemed to be of the same material. "You plan to live as long as it does, eh Zani?" said Pasquale.

"Oh no, it will outlive me, you, and the sons of our sons."

Standing amidst the peasants, Gherardo felt a profound pleasure, sensing the gift of their confidence; it seemed that no satisfaction could be worth so much. Count Geminiani came up to him from the group of gentry.

The people greeted him, moving aside and watching with discretion; it was the first time that he had been seen in public since his nephew's death. Count Geminiani smiled. "Ah, you've really made yourself one of ours," he said slapping Gherardo on the back and smiling in complicity with the people who were gathered around. Then he sat on a bent root of the ilex to listen, shaking his head every so often as a sign of doubt, or watching Gherardo with a certain friendly irony. "The wolf loses fur but not his teeth; our Gherardo always wants to argue. If it wasn't obvious that he also knows how to get a few things done, we wouldn't think much of him, eh?"

The men gathered around Gherardo and Gepponi laughed.

"No, you've figured things wrong, dear Gepponi. You say there are four able-bodied men in your family, and that if you all went to work for wages you'd earn more than if you stayed on the farm. But first of all you have to figure in everything, the vegetable garden,

the chickens, all the little things that if you had to go buy them, it would be another matter. And then . . . but you can see it better than me; meanwhile, you stay here. . . .”

“Ah, you know how it is, we love the farm. . . .”

“Right; but do you know why you love it? Because you are building a future, because the fruits of your labor are not all used up today. I admit, working as a laborer you would earn more. But how long would it last? The family changes; some grow up, some get old; they’re born and they die. And if necessary the farm can be managed with even less manpower when everything’s well managed. On the farm everyone helps, big and small, women and children, and even the old folks. And when a family remains there, it’s as if it was their own.”

“True; but then it has to be shared.”

“There’s always that. No matter how one manages, things have to be divided. The fields, the houses, the padroni have to provide. And they have to maintain things. The roads, the wells, and so on. If it weren’t the padroni it would be someone else. And then the taxes?”

“I agree, it’s a big job for the padroni too.”

“Someone has to direct, to administer. And he too has to have his share. And then, ownership is a more serious matter. If among you there is one who does his duty, who is competent, who earns and saves, would it be fair if he had to share with someone who doesn’t want to do anything, someone who, whatever he gets,

he drinks up or carouses away? You, Gepponi, who have a couple of thousand lira in the bank — its useless to say no, everyone knows — you've earned it by the sweat of your brow, a lira at a time, for yourself and for your children; would you be happy if it were taken to be given to people like Bello, for example, or Anselmo? If you had to work for them to support them, instead of for your children? Rather than some day, having enough to buy a farm. . . . “

“Ah,” interrupted Vagheggini of Montecchio, “it doesn't make sense for us peasants to buy farms. There are too many expenses, too many taxes. The harvests are too small to bargain with, and the buyers strangle us. Did you see what Pieri of Pian di Feccia did? He bought the farm at Celleri, but he still works his old one on the estate as a sharecropper, and he's installed a peasant at Celleri. . . .”

These were old issues; everyday concepts that seemed eternal; but speaking of them so openly between the two classes, between padroni and tenants, lent them an unexpected vigor and significance. Even the signori had gathered round and were listening. Count Geminiani rose. “It's useless; you have to have order,” he said, taking Gherardo by the arm. “And when it's done really well. . . .”

Signora Flavia Micheli came to walk beside Gherardo, and gradually led him toward the new plantings on the plateau, as if she wanted to be alone with him. “Will you be happy now?” she asked. In what did she envy him, Flavia? It seemed that into her natural light-

heartedness had infiltrated a certain bitterness that didn't fit with Gherardo's conception of her.

"Happy? I have a lot on my mind! But who knows, one gets used to it, one works, one forges ahead, some saint will come to my assistance. . . ."

"I didn't mean that. What I meant to say . . . you two. It's obvious, you know, that you're much in love. How Corinna has changed. You're very lucky . . ."

Gherardo was reminded of some rumors around the Fattoria, to which he hadn't paid as much attention as most. But now, with Flavia's attitude, they took on a sad flavor of truth. It was whispered that she and Caprolato had something going, and that her husband, for all his jealousy and gloomy manner, appeared not to be aware of it, or didn't want to be. Rather he had become very cocky over his new friendship with the nobility of Siena, like someone who has bought a title.

"The credit doesn't all go to Corinna. To have a real man for a husband is easier for a woman." Her voice had become more serious, a seriousness that revealed some bitterness. They took a few steps in silence.

"If you hear bad things about me, don't you too throw stones at me."

"I? But why would I. . . ." Gherardo could find nothing to say. Anything might give offense.

"Yes, you. If I had had the courage to speak to you, last year, who knows, certain things, maybe . . . but you have never shown me the least bit of friendship."

"I?" said Gherardo, stunned. But in fact he recalled

that several times it had seemed to him that Signora Flavia had been in need of sympathy, of cheering up. Vaguely he had promised himself to befriend her; basically he liked her natural openness, liveliness. But it was just at the time when he felt that he was losing the land under his feet; he had too many concerns, then, it wasn't the moment.

"I don't even know why I say these things. But I have always had faith in you. And I needed to unburden myself. When you admire someone, you want to be understood, or at least excused," and she raised her eyes contritely to him, as they walked slowly side by side with heads bowed. They found themselves looking at each other.

"Ah, I've found you!" They turned; Corinna and Micheli were climbing toward them, panting from the effort.

"The men are looking for you," said Corinna. "Where did you manage to hide, you two?" she added laughing; but there was a hint of disapproval in her nonchalance.

"We've been talking . . ." said Gherardo vaguely. Could she be a bit jealous, Corinna? That would be laughable, if it weren't for Flavia. Poor Flavia, between those two men, both contemptible. And he stole a glance at Micheli, who in returning toward Casaccia was walking alongside his wife, with his usual attitude of submission.

He was no longer the self-confident, pushy Micheli of the past. Seeing him so quiet and contrite, he

seemed diminished. He matched his pace to that of his wife with a curious humility. There was still a certain pride, almost nobility, in that submission; perhaps one who accepts misfortune simply acquires a sense of detachment from things; in a certain way he puts himself above vicissitudes. It also seemed that Flavia had taken on a hardness in her lips, and in her frown. What had changed her? She used to be so carefree. Perhaps her own husband, in his time, poor man. . . . In any case it was bad; he would have to talk with her on the earliest occasion, since she trusted him, carefully of course, trying to mend things. . . . Gherardo took a certain pleasure in the idea; it would be a good thing, and, though he didn't admit it to himself, anything but disagreeable. Unless — and he'd better think this over — Corinna got it into her head to be jealous. In that case he would be accomplishing nothing. And there was also the fact that Flavia's confidence, her desire for friendship, without her even realizing it, might be a veiled, instinctive way to attract him: "Help me, save me. . . ."

That evening, in the new rooms, there was dancing. The Bellenghis, the Lombards of Casanova, put on a show with a folk dance from their area, the *furlana*, to lots of applause; but the enthusiasm reached a peak when Rocco of Camporedalda and Virginia of Sant'Ansano were led to the middle of the room and everyone made them dance the *trescona*. They had been married the day before in Rosia, secretly, without

saying anything to anyone. But the word got around and now they were made to pay.

As a wedding gift Corinna sent them a bed of that florid style that she had been gradually removing from every bedroom in the villa, reducing it in status each time, until it had ended in the attic. From there it had been carried to Sant'Ansano. First it had been checked over and some of its most evident flaws repaired, and thus was nourished the hope that in a few generations it might take on the distinction of old age.

XXXVII

Ah, the sense of well being at evening, the fatigue that slows the body, relaxes the limbs! The benefits of the physical life, the body's vigor, health. Those simple foods when one is hungry, those flavorful soups, the legumes, the fresh salads, the good bread, the fruit.

After dinner, Corinna let her fingers run over the keys of the piano —it had been retuned, with vast improvement — mixing notes and thoughts in a disorder that seemed to reflect an interior order, one that could be followed only if the will to do so was abandoned.

She knew that Gherardo liked this, classical starting points that progressed through some transition chords to come out in the precise rhythm of a dance tune, a pleasing accompaniment to his daydreams. From the window Gherardo let his gaze follow the rough outline of his thinking, the phantasms of his imagination that ran on their own, down through the severe valley of the Rigolenso, bathed in moonlight.

Pitch-black, the line of cypresses in the *chiuso* garden stood guard like sentinels. What power there was in those dark forms pointed to the sky! What creature

did they resemble? Was it possible that their expression was one of appearance only, that it had no correspondence with their inner nature? That it was he who gave them that pride, that nobility? And was it possible that the enchantment of the night, the beauty, all that unconfined vastness, was given its life, its soul, by him, who felt such a small part of that thinking, living immensity? Under the cypresses the foliage of the ilexes closed in, dense and jealous. His view crossed the mouth of the Rigolenso, passed on to the houses of Le Palazze, high and narrow like fortresses, extended along the thick forests of the great hill of Boscogrosso to drop down into the deep valley floating in moonlight, as far as Castiglioni.

Castiglioni, *Castiglion che dio sol sa*. The Castle that only God knows. Its massive tower had long guarded the peace of the mountains and valleys of the region, of his region. It was the sign of man, of man's will. How much hope, how much love, he had experienced since he first became aware of Castiglioni. What profound alterations in his being, which he had thought were fixed in the maturity of his forties! And how to explain, at the beginning of the age that should signal the beginning of his physical decline, this development of his spirit? It was as if he had never, before now, been able to understand and respond to nature, to that spirit of nature whose visible presence he felt in the enchanted evening, the physical concrete existence to which he felt he belonged, together with all things, in unity with all things. And was this God, this religious

peace with all beings? Surely, it is in this way that life can become sublime.

Entering his forty-fifth year, looking ahead from those thousand-year-old stones, he knew by now what destiny might hold in store. The future could be controlled; he had the strength, the wisdom to control it. To know this gave a sense of security, of serenity, but tempered by the sadness of understanding that it also meant renunciation. By now his life was decided.

In five years he would be fifty, and Corinna a little more than thirty. The difference, now, was not so apparent; if he had a bit of gray hair at the temples, he was still alive to the urges of youth. And Corinna had recently become so mature, so thoughtfully mature. Without looking at her he sensed her attentive and serious profile, caressed by the glow of the candle on the piano, and a vague shadow of remorse settled on him. Too serious, too soon. Before long the day would come when he would begin to feel his age, all of a sudden, all together. How then could he, aged, profit from that young life: like a parasite? In the old days, patriarchal graybeards used to marry young maidens; but, he thought with a sly smile, he would like to see them deal with a modern woman!

He felt reassured. He didn't have the egoism to suck the life blood from her youth; he would know how to organize a life better adapted to her, leaving her some freedom, helping her like a father, with a discrete and wise protection. But the ways of the world might work against him, might not permit him

this great freedom, nor permit her to benefit from it. Nor perhaps — here he felt himself invaded by a tender consolation — would Corinna herself want it. And maybe he would not be capable of it himself: something in him that he couldn't at the moment foresee might oppose it, embittered by age, jealous and vindictive of her youth, as one so often sees.

But perhaps there could be a right way, a way not yet foreseeable, just as he had not foreseen so many things that had happened between them. And then there was their child on the way. Perhaps he would show the way, cancel every uncertainty. A boy child, born at Cerreta, who would grow up at Cerreta, who would continue his work.

And how much there was to do for his son at Cerreta. Certainly, above all, conserve. Conserve the work of the forebears, which the land quickly retakes; never take his eyes off the goal, be as busy as the bee, the ant. With a son it would be easier to do still more; he would inherit the stubbornly garnered product of so many years of effort. Ah, in twenty, twenty-five years, what marvels they could accomplish at Cerreta! And in the forests, what riches, how they would be beautiful. By that time he might no longer exist. But there would be his son.

And if his son didn't want to continue, if he were to choose a different career? He recalled his own father's dismay when he hadn't wanted to continue in the family business, his father's life work. Perhaps it was natural for sons to want to go out on their own, to

find their road for themselves, their adventure. But this, the land, was the right way. And don't all roads seem right to the men who have chosen them, have mapped out their own way? And for the young, weren't new ways opening every day as the world changed? Yes, but the land is the first, the most necessary, the most natural; and it's the last, that to which all must return. And if a man is open to his spiritual side, and can develop it in self-awareness, it's here that the best of life in the entire world can be found.

True, if today his son were here to call him to account, he could not show him anything but defeats, the wealth that he should have passed to him diminished, rendered immovable, made sterile to a certain extent. How many years of straitened circumstances must pass before the property would be freed from the weight with which it was burdened, to be given free and clear to his son? Even then, how small would be the recompense for having taken on so great a task, compared to the prizes with which society rewards other services? He himself certainly wouldn't make the trade. His payment was that which the peasants derived from their manual labor: sustenance, a home, little more. And wasn't that fair? The little more was the prize for greater foresight; even that was fair. By now he knew from experience that manual labor, toil, was a joy to the body, but was not enough. It was necessary to think, to plan, to organize, to manage; and that was harder.

To manage, then. One had the future of the people

in one's hands, as a manager, but one was also their closest neighbor; they could be loved. One administered justice, one compensated for their bad luck, one took care of those who couldn't care for themselves. The rain, left to its own devices, eroded the earth to sterile rock; instead, gathered and channeled in ditches, it nourished the work of man. So one worked with the unconscious forces of nature, one took life at its roots, guided, channeled, corrected, made it productive. What greater joy, what higher destiny could be assigned to a human being? What other life could be compared to it? Don't all the others depend on this first work? The others add nothing of the essential; the farmer is at the source of everything, and closer to God; he feels it with his hands, in the seed, in being the first to understand the Word.

But was the ownership of property justified by the work of its possessor, the possession of land that was worked by others? No, perhaps not, but who can direct the people except someone who has given proof of knowing how to conserve? And who would manage and conserve the land if not for the children? Ideally should it not be for all the children, and thus for all? Perhaps, one day, but first men would have to change. Who would grow trees that require generations to be fruitful, if not for his own family? For humanity, one big family? Men die and the land remains. And it's a great sadness. The land for he who works it? But the land has no value except for that bit that man has turned to his purposes. Take the land after everything

has been done, when everything has been paid for with work and with savings? Thus in an ancient castle built by a great family whose fortunes have long since declined, twenty families now live. As long as the family lasts, the property will last.

There could be no doubt; the truth was here. There was no great profit, but every morning, on rising and walking one's own land, every plant that owes its life to one's own work, every furrow that's been plowed, every help given to the people entrusted to one, is in itself the recompense and must be enough. There it was: the seed that had remained in him since childhood, from the earth of Val di Bisenzio, had germinated and produced its fruit. Thus is the seed conserved and the continuity of the species provided for; one sows and not only for oneself. Pass on the seed. Let them do as they wish, then, the sons; let them follow their inclinations or their vocations, those who have them — wonderful things, vocations — but let them always have within themselves, unforgettable, their adolescence in the fields and forests, and perhaps one day, after the adventure of life, whatever that might be, they will return to the sure, to the true: to the land. More than that one could not do; more than that could not be asked of fathers; beyond that is fate, the future. And repose.

Turning, Corinna noticed that Gherardo's head was nodding. She smiled to herself, enjoying the selfish feeling of being alone, yet with him, as in bed when Gherardo fell asleep as soon as his head touched the

pillow while she still read, or closing the book stayed awake fantasizing, with a sense of security in seeing him resting so quietly beside her. Gherardo, "her man," as the women up here would say. His serene features in repose radiated tranquility. Gherardo, her man. What had ever happened to his ambitions, his hopes of freedom, of living, the brilliant ideas, the urgent desires of youth? Surely he could have made a different destiny for himself. Not that he should be pitied; he was content. But the satisfactions were few.

And here was winter at the door again. Another winter, and this time they would stay up here. But winters at Cerreta no longer scared her. It was no longer the same. The city didn't tempt her. Now she had so much to do, so many important things. Was it possible that last year she in this same room was battling her wings against the closed windows like a butterfly that couldn't find its freedom? A year: it seemed a lifetime. With a mild regret she felt an era of her life ending. All that she had wanted with such intensity, the only things that seemed worth living for, now counted for so little. But youth wasn't over; some remained for later; who knows . . . the image of Sandro, warm and indistinct, passed through her like a flush of blood. It was almost with remorse that she felt her love for his blooming adolescence transmuting itself into one of those wells of anguish and loss that spring from a youthful impression and stay with us throughout our lives. But somehow, in passing through that anguish, the love she felt for Gherardo had become se-

cure. And isn't it possible to love at the same time the beauty of the young ash tree, strong and growing with earth's riotous freshness, and the powerful ilex, arrived at maturity, certain of its strength and of its future?

From Sandro she had inherited a love of the forest, of nature, a sense of living with them, in them, a wild creature, free and happy. She began to feel with a strange sense of pride that her beauty was not lost up here, that the mountains, the forests, the people, appreciated her, that they wanted her to be beautiful. A graceless woman would be a sad figure in the midst of so much pure natural beauty, among these people who had such an appreciation, so necessary and yet so difficult, for the things that were their lot. And besides there was Gherardo who, with all his strength, was so sensitive to those things, so impressionable. . . .

She laughed aloud; Gherardo opened his eyes and found her balanced on the arm of his chair. She was wearing a dress with great splashes of light colors; she looked like a tropical bird with gaudy feathers that had perched there during his nap.

Suddenly Corinna slapped her forehead.

"What's the matter?" Gherardo asked her.

"I've spent the last hour philosophizing about the past, the present and the future, and this little one who's about to be born didn't even cross my mind."

Strange, it occurred to her suddenly: she had other things to think about, and so did Gherardo. And they sat there side by side, each working intently at a thought, without either asking the other about what.

But my God, how she was gaining weight. She appeared to have developed a new bone structure, more adult, more powerful. Who would have said, beforehand, that she would be more beautiful thus? In his turn Gherardo smiled.

“And what are you laughing about?”

“I was thinking of Teresa. I met her today in the courtyard of the Fattoria, chatting with the women who were drawing water. I wanted to say to her: ‘Have you seen how water has come to Cerreta? Have you seen what the saint has done?’ I should tell you that one day when I was at San Bernardino making some measurements, there were a bunch of women gathered around the spring who seemed to be concocting something, and Teresa stepped forward:

‘Now then, signor padrone, it’s best not to try to bring the water to Cerreta; the old padroni tried too and spent a fortune on it, but the saint don’t want it.’

‘What do you mean, the saint?’ And she takes up the story: ‘The old folks say that they were told by those that came before them, and it’s true, that the saint gave this water to the people up here when before there was only that of Botraccio below Le Palazze, which is no good and tastes terrible. One day San Bernardino came up here to preach; he preached that the men drinking so much wine, getting drunk, did evil to themselves and to others. Then someone said to him “But up here there’s nothing other than wine to drink, no good water.”

And then the saint struck a rock with the point of

his staff and out flowed this spring, to which there's nothing comparable in these parts. You know, up above here, where the fire passed, is called the Hill of the Saint, Poggio al Santo. There must be some truth in it. He was a great wanderer, San Bernardino, a simpatico saint."

It had been the summer's great accomplishment. When, in the early days, Gherardo had conceived the daring project of bringing water to Cerreta, everyone had given him advice. The spring was too far away, too low. Mastiani, not least, had smiled at the idea, shaking his head with his usual condescension. But every time Gherardo saw Cerreta's oxen hauling barrels to be filled at the spring, he thought of all the good water that was lost down the Rigolenso, without doing any good for anyone. Along the road he always met women with terracotta pots and peasants with carts, going back and forth to the spring. Gherardo circled that water like a bird dog during a passing migration where he can't figure out where the birds are coming from. The local experts advised against it: it was even thought that in the process they could lose the vein of water; water was a jealous thing. And the quality of San Bernardino's water was known as far as Siena. But Gherardo was unconvinced.

Then came the hard times and the question of water had been put aside. But one day, wandering about, he had caught sight of a thicket of cattails in the midst of the woods a hundred meters above the spring, a light splash amid dark evergreens. He came back with

two men: with hoes in an hour they had reached the water. Between the white strata of slate above a bank of compact clay, the water was bubbling clean and clear, sliding down the clay. It was a different spring that went on to lose itself somewhere underground in the pervious limestone. Judging by eye, it should be higher than the tower of Cerreta. He called Ruggero and the mason Porcelli with his level: it was higher.

It took some time to build a reservoir and run a pipeline along a route cleared by the workmen. The work nearly caused a riot. To San Bernardino, in the summer, people came for water from all the nearby estates, from all the isolated houses, from Pian di Feccia, from Brenna, from twenty miles around. Whoever wanted excellent water had to come there. Word got around that the padrone of Cerreta was taking the water away; the guards came to tell him that it was being murmured around that the water was in the public domain, and that no one could touch it. It took a lot of effort to make it known that he was not touching San Bernardino's water, that it was taken from a different spring. But even Gherardo had his doubts, and only when the pipeline arrived at the courtyard of the Fattoria and the first jet of water was disgorged did he breathe easier. The next time he went to Siena he made the rounds of the antique shops until he found a glazed terracotta statue of the saint and had it installed by the spring, as a thanks to San Bernardino.

"And how is the school doing?" asked Gherardo, yawning absently. On that subject he had to go slowly;

Corinna was sensitive. It was the first important matter that she had undertaken, and all had not gone too well at first. The schoolteacher that the authorities had sent from the Culture Board — and to obtain the concession she had had to put in motion all her Roman connections — had no sooner seen the place than she had gotten sick and had had to go back home. She was a girl of twenty; one could understand that the vast solitude and all those woods had depressed her. While they waited for another, Corinna, against regulations, had taken over as substitute.

"The most serious problem at the school is absenteeism. They have a mountain of excuses; now, for example, with the gathering of the chestnuts, half don't show up in the morning. I wanted to ask you to put in a word. Some are incorrigible. . . ."

"For example, who?"

"The worst for truancy are the Boccinis of Sant'Ansano, the children of the new shepherd at Castiglioni, those from Cerro, what's their name?"

"The Lenzi. Understandable, the farthest away. It's a long trip. . . ."

"You're right; but they don't care about school."

"I'll take care of it," Gherardo sighed. "Tomorrow I'll send for them. No, I'll go there myself."

"You know, after all that has been done . . . you've got to make them understand that if there isn't the attendance, there's the chance that they'd close the school. And then it would be worse. Things could go back as they were before, those poor kids, having to go

to Pian di Feccia, ten miles on foot. . . .”

“Ah, they solved that problem easily; they didn’t send them. But don’t worry, I’ll deal with it. Whoever doesn’t send his children to school will get no work from me this winter. You’ll see that they’ll come.”

“And then I’ve been asked to set up an evening school for the men, when the new teacher arrives. Did you know that? It was their idea. They came and asked me after mass on Sunday, when you had gone to Montorsaio for the animal fair. One per family, there were thirty, and asked to come and talk to me; Cosci did the talking, really well, saying that they were very much aware of what was being done for them. . . .” There was a tenderness in Corinna’s voice, almost tearful. “In short there was a bit of appreciation,” Gherardo nodded, “for the first thing that I’ve done.”

But it wasn’t the first. It had been she who, just returned to Cerreta, had done everything necessary to reinstitute the Mass that hadn’t been said there since the old priest had left. And to Gherardo’s great surprise — he didn’t consider the people truly believers — the church was crowded, couldn’t contain everyone, every Sunday. The women said: you can believe in this new priest.

“By the way,” Corinna added, “I think I’ve found just the place, the machinery room, now that it’s no longer used, where Petrini used to work, poor fellow.”

What was needed now was a meeting place. Every so often the young people wanted to dance, at Carnival for instance, and the old folks would go too to

watch and to take part. Up to now they had gone here and there, in people's houses. But the number of Cerreta families had grown, and their rooms were small. Then there were school recitals, which had to be done with a certain solemnity, and other occasions for bringing everyone together for announcements and discussions. A room was needed.

"But what about the machines then?" he asked. She wanted a bit too much, Corinna. You know, when you give them a finger, the women want the hand and then the arm. . . .

"The only thing left is the mowing machine, and that's broken. I was there today."

Ah me, it was true. The truck had been sold, more or less for scrap. The plows were distributed to the peasants. The tractor, once the heavy work of breaking in the bottom lands was finished, had been given to the manager of Marmoraia in exchange for three pairs of oxen; at Cerreta it was better to work with animals: keep more animals, have more manure, make more hay. By this time Gherardo had little sympathy for machines.

"All right then, well take a look tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, always tomorrow. . . . You never get anywhere!"

Yes, but one must go slowly. What had surprised him most was, one day, to find Corinna in the kitchen of the Fattoria in a great white apron, her bare arms plunged into the basin where the tomatoes, lavish and succulent, were being made into sauce.

XXXVIII

One afternoon, late, after a sudden unexpected rain, Pasquale came to the office and asked to speak to Gherardo privately. He had finally picked up the trail of Anselmo and Bello; he had managed to get it out of the mouth of the shepherd of Castiglioni who had put them up the night before; he had met him returning from Brenna with a pack of stuff that clearly wasn't for him: cigarettes, cartridges, liquor. . . . The shepherd had been entangled in the situation against his will, he'd been threatened: if he wanted to save his skin. And down by the Ricause, toward evening, Pasquale had seen the smoke of a fire at the abandoned mill, where the year before they had caught the otter, between the chestnut grove of the Riovivo and the thickets of Cavaglioni. He had come in at a gallop. It was essential to act quickly. He planned to saddle a fresh horse and go to Pian di Feccia for the Carabinieri. The padrone should say nothing to anyone; you never knew. He started off at a walk, but at the fork beyond the gate he put his horse to a gallop.

At Castiglioni, under the cap of the tower fireplace, as big as a small room, two men were drying off at the fire. At a little distance, in the shadows broken by the

flickering of the flames, standing stock-still in a line, the shepherd, his wife, and their children were looking on with respect mixed with admiration and with fear. A steady drizzle beat on the tiles of the roof and on the cobbles of the courtyard.

"What a life!" said one of the men raising his head in profound disgust. The flame momentarily illuminated his features; it was Anselmo. "I've had it. How can we last, now that winter's coming? If I can manage to get to a town with a railroad, I'll grab the train. Once I'm in a city, who will find me?"

"The problem is the road. The problem is to leave the woods. If we get on a road in these parts, we'll be seen and caught."

"Say what you want. If they catch me, they catch me. Better in prison than to die of hunger and cold in the woods this winter. Shepherd, give us something to drink."

Bello, lying on a bench, was sleeping.

The one who carelessly but patiently was responding to Anselmo's laments was a small thin man who seemed almost a boy. With an aggressive carelessness he wore a cyclist's beret pulled down over his eyes, hiding a good part of his face. Around his neck he wore a piece of black scarf fastened with a clasp with the picture of a woman on it. At Anselmo's words he rose and began to pace back and forth in the narrow space: "If you had ever been in solitary you'd think twice about going back. Better. . . ." He shook his head two or three times, always looking at the ground.

He had an agile and smooth way of moving, catlike; there was a sense of elastic agility, like a tightrope walker or a gymnast.

"Ah, I should never have come back from Marseilles," sighed Anselmo. "It seems a dream, to think of it now."

"Yes, I know," said Blondie with an angry gesture. "You've talked about it enough. But if you left, it means that you had good reason."

"You would have liked it there too. Who knows what conquests you would have made with your saintly ways. Some women would go nuts for a type like you."

"Forget the women," admonished Blondie, lighting a cigarette with an air of superiority, still pacing up and down in the little space like an animal in a cage.

Anselmo was obviously dominated by that decisiveness, by that intensity like a white-hot flame, at the same time hating it, like a woman with the lover she fears. Contemplating the situation with a cool mind, he realized that he lacked the courage to take off on his own; it took only two words from Blondie to make him fall under the orbit of the other's will again.

On his bench Bello was snoring, oblivious to the contemptuous looks Anselmo threw at him in the same way he would have given a kick to the shepherd's dog if it had gotten between his legs.

"And then this buffoon on our hands" added Anselmo. "No, we can't go on this way."

Blondie made a gesture of impatience. "Do something else then, if you can."

"It's not my fault if at the Osteria Bianca. . . ."

Blondie stopped, waiting for Anselmo to finish talking. Since he didn't go on, he said, provocatively: "Meaning? Say what you want to say, what you're thinking."

Anselmo, looking away, muttered in a low voice as if excusing himself: "Take it easy young fellow. There's no need to get all worked up. In my time we were more careful. There was no need at all to tip our hand. Anyway, before. . . ."

"Before is before, and now is now. Is it my fault that the brigadier changed his mind?"

"Exactly. Things can be done more cleanly. . . ."

"And you know something? I don't have to answer to anyone."

Silence, as if there was nothing else to be said. Anselmo was looking down at his worn-out shoes.

Just then the dog growled, moved toward the door with a couple of sharp barks. Blondie jerked Bello upright. Anselmo opened a window and leaning out from the back of the tower looked down into the darkness. From there, where the exterior wall dropped to a pile of rocks below, one could climb to the ground with the help of footholds on the protruding stones.

"Go and see who it is," said Anselmo to the shepherd, already out the window with his feet on a ledge in the wall, supporting himself with hands on the sill. Bello, wrapped in his overcoat, hurried heavily to the window. Rosa of the Osteria Bianca entered on the run, all mud from head to toe.

"Jump down; there's no time to lose," she said to Blondie. But no one moved, waiting to know what had happened.

"About seven Pasquale passed at a gallop, going up, then he came back down with the Carabinieri. I came by the shortcut, but they'll be here soon. . . ."

Steps clattered on the stairs. Blondie leaped over the sill and, clambering over Anselmo's body, climbed down the wall to the ground. Leaning over the window sill Rosa saw him slide over the escarpment into the darkness. But there was a tumbling of rocks and Anselmo felt his foothold give way from beneath him; a stone came loose and he remained hanging, hands clutching the sill. Frightened by those hands, clinging like claws to the rocks, Bello turned back, looked around, saw the big wooden flour chest; the *madia*, and crawled inside but couldn't manage to close the lid. He took off his overcoat and Rosa draped it over him as if it were covering the loaves of bread.

Guns at the ready, Pasquale and two Carabinieri entered. Rosa stood at the window concealing Anselmo's clawing hands. "Where are they?" asked Pasquale of Rosa. Motionless, the shepherd and his family didn't breathe.

"Who?" said Rosa with an indifferent air.

The Carabinieri, their service carbines at the ready, made a circuit of the room in the semidarkness.

"And what are you doing down there?" Pasquale asked, looking with fascination at the cover on the *madia*, shouldering his gun slowly, mechanically. The

slight movement with which the cover rose and fell was easily perceptible in the shadow it threw against the wall. With a rapid movement Rosa crossed to the table and knocked over the lamp. A small flame flared up. Bello, rising to a sitting position, just had time to see the gun pointed at him when all went dark. Then came a scream and a heavy thud on the rocks below, followed by a moan that slowly died away. Anselmo, unable to withstand the horrible strain on his muscles, had let go and fallen heavily onto the rocks.

In the dark Bello and Pasquale were on the floor, locked together. By the light of a lantern they saw that Bello had Pasquale by the throat. Head pinned to the ground, Pasquale was wrestling with his entire body, like a snake held down with a stick. The grip of Bello's hands was so tight that in the scuffle that followed it almost seemed they wouldn't have time to free Pasquale before he suffocated.

From the foot of the tower came a voice: "He's dead; his head was smashed on the rocks."

But Blondie and Rosa had disappeared. Around them had closed the dark woods in the heavy autumn rain.

XXXIX

The last light was waning beyond Selvalta when, from the top of Le Rocche, Gherardo began to distinguish down in the bottom of the dark, narrow valley of the Rosia the torches that came and went around Sant'Ansano. They were carrying the old woman away this evening. Pasquale had found her two days before, dead, in the chestnut grove. At first he had taken her for a bundle of rags, then had noticed a tuft of gray hair that stuck out from a bit of cloth and below, against the earth, the face that looked like a stone. Under the nearby chestnuts, browsed the sheep.

He picked her up like a bundle and carried her to the house; she weighed nothing. The sad old woman's death had mattered little to anyone; since the fateful evening when Anselmo had knocked her down the stairs in his frenetic escape she had never been herself again. She no longer spoke, nor connected with anyone — an empty husk, as if she had begun to die then. But she insisted on tending the sheep. She would have died that way sooner or later, if not today, tomorrow.

It happened on Saturday. The carpenter from Rosia had gone to Siena to visit relatives, the one from Pian di Feccia was sick; they had to put together the

simple coffin as best they could at Cerreta, the guards and the stonemason working together. So they lost a whole day.

It seemed that everyone was in a hurry. The coffin had been loaded on Boccini's cart. Even the donkey was impatient to get moving. The priest had a foot on the shaft, to climb up front. No one was aware of Gherardo. In the dark Gherardo approached the group, dominated by Teresa, who was taller than the others: "Poor old woman, her suffering is over, Teresa."

"She endured a lot, though, in her world."

Gherardo stayed in the courtyard next to Teresa watching the little procession moving away among the flickering torches on the road to the Ponte della Pia bridge.

Dark against the opening of the arch, Pasquale, with his shotgun slung over his shoulder, had stayed in the doorway. He appeared stooped, as if he were getting old. And they were the kind who never age, Pasquale and Teresa: good people. What a shame; by now it was too late.

From Cerreta came down, strong and solemn, the sound of the bell that tolled for the dead. Both turned; it was the first time they had heard it ring since it had been put back in place. It had not been easy to find someone capable of doing the welding. The bell had taken on its beautiful old tone, rich and deep. Gherardo repeated in his mind JOHANNES • SENENSIS • ME • FECIT • A.D. 1432.

FINE DEL
RACCONTO

